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SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

British Edition

No. 9

A Great Fantasy Novel

THE PERSECUTORS

Cleve Cartmill 4

Voices of an other-dimensional world, no human mind could know them and live. Yet they must break through, they must make themselves known—and drag down the Earth to their abysmal level of pure evil!

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THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION



THE PERSECUTORS

Voices of an unknown, other-dimensional world they were, so overwhelming no human mind could know them and live. This is a story of a man at bay against an alien cosmos and its substanceless masters—the Persecutors!

CHAPTER I

THE VOICE FROM NOWHERE

DR. RODNEY EARL, Ps.D., looked hungrily through the soundproof panel at the young man in the next room. His hands shook as he took an object from the litter before him on the plastic table, shielding it behind spread palms. He flipped the communication switch.

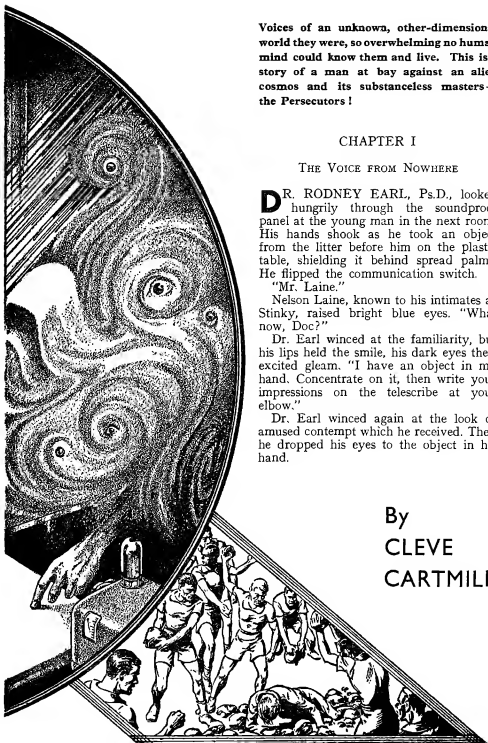
"Mr. Laine."

Nelson Laine, known to his intimates as Stinky, raised bright blue eyes. "What now, Doc?"

Dr. Earl winced at the familiarity, but his lips held the smile, his dark eyes their excited gleam. "I have an object in my hand. Concentrate on it, then write your impressions on the telescribe at your elbow."

Dr. Earl winced again at the look of amused contempt which he received. Then he dropped his eyes to the object in his hand.

By
CLEVE
CARTMILL



Young Laine closed his eyes for ten seconds. Then he touched a series of keys on the instrument.

On a built-in screen under Dr. Earl's eyes, words began to appear, jerkily at first, but soon in a confident rhythm.

"Three hundred years before the organization of the Greater United States, a wave of raiders swept up from the south and attacked the government research center at Kansas City. The raiders were beaten off, and the secrets of the center saved. But this silent and savage raid served to break the lethargy which—"

"Enough!" Dr. Earl said. "Perfect. Watch!"

He dropped the object—a small spool of plastic ribbon—into a projection slot on his table, and words appeared on the wall reading-screen.

"Three hundred years before the orga—"

Dr. Earl cut the switch. The screen blanked out.

"Come in here, Laine."

Laine complied, a faint smile on his lips. He sank into a chair the same cream color as his shorts and likewise monogrammed with the university's "W."

"It gives me a great deal of pleasure," Dr. Earl began, "to say that you may enter my class—with honours."

The smile dropped from Laine's face. A slight glint pinpointed his eyes. He said nothing.

"You are almost as far advanced in this particular phase of Psychometrics, Laine, as I. But you are a natural mutation, whereas I am the end result of several generations of controlled—ah, progress. With the start you have, you can be greater than any man has ever been in this field. In addition to what you can learn, you can earn, too. I can promise you a most responsible position with Genetics Research."

Nelson Laine interrupted curtly. "Break it off, Doc."

"Eh?"

"I'm not having some. So long."

He started to his feet, but Dr. Earl waved him back with an astonished hand. "This is unprecedented. To enter my class is one of the greatest honours given any student."

"The world doesn't think so."

"Bah! Social inertia has always resisted great advances. Didn't fools fight the

establishment of carrier waves for germicidal frequencies for a whole century? Of course the world doesn't think Psychometrics is the most beneficial science this or any other civilization has known. It is our job to teach them to recognize and embrace it."

Laine broke in again. "And I don't want anything to do with G.R., either. When I get married I want to pick my own babe."

"Stop!" Dr. Earl snapped. "Genetics Research has never exerted any pressure on its selectees. My father and mother met in quite an ordinary manner on a Moon excursion."

"I hear different, Doc, and I don't want to argue. I'm going to be an engineer and work with my hands. Besides, you may not have a class tomorrow, so your offer's kinda empty."

"Eh? What's this?"

"You'll hear about it soon enough. Jackson Peebles is going to have you fired."

"Because I expelled his moronic son from my class? He can't prefer charges pertaining to the manner in which I conduct my class."

"Maybe you'll laugh, Doc, and maybe not. But Peebles is thinking of charging you with witchcraft."

Dr. Earl didn't laugh. He remembered his study of the Dark Decade, when ancient laws were revived and refined. The charge could be fought and beaten; but his reputation could be damaged to a great extent by such a charge. Not that anyone believed, but belief lay dormant, awaiting only a resurrecting stimulus.

"He could dust off the old laws, Doc, and smack you with 'em."

DR. EARL was silent. His silence was tinged with an exultation which promised to blot out the fear which had haunted him for more than a year.

The fact that any person could think of bringing such ridiculous charges against him proved, almost, that he was not suffering from hallucinations. Others had seen one of the phenomena which had heretofore plagued him only in private. Yesterday the event had been public and had done much to destroy his suspicion that he had been going mad.

The mad scientist—he had smiled grimly at the thought. Those whirling mists, those

green flames, those balls of screaming colors which had appeared to him in his study at night, had roused actual fear in his mind. Yet, beyond and above these, he had sensed—something.

Something had been persecuting him, driving him to madness, for psychic flashes had accompanied each materialization of meaningless blobs. He had felt that somewhere in the vast deeps of unplumbed experience, some presence—force, intelligence—was hammering at his brain with a message.

Message? Command? Request?

He didn't know. They came silently, evilly in the dark to persecute him. He recognized the feeling as possible evidence of psychic trauma, the development of a persecution complex. But nonetheless a deep conviction whispered that the experiences were real, that some actual identity pounded at the barrier of his consciousness.

He weighed this conviction as further evidence of a growing madness, and refused to relax, refused to listen to the disembodied voice which called in darkness.

But yesterday the phenomena had emerged into the open, had entered his classroom, had been seen by his students. He was now almost convinced that his persecutors were real, if unseen intelligences, clamoring for communication.

His exultation had been instant, and in his anger at the charge of trickery he had expelled young Peebles from his class.

But though he had almost lost the suspicion of his own madness, he was helpless to defend himself publicly. He was not yet positive, and could offer no concrete defense against a charge of charlatanism and trickery—or witchcraft, if it came to that. He did not want to talk about it. Nelson Laine, it seemed, did.

"Some of us were called from Engineering to examine the classroom for gadgets, Doc. Either you made that cap of flame with your own hands, or—" he paused—"something made it. We didn't find a thing. A search ray which one of the boys beamed you with didn't reveal anything out of the way on your person except a letter to your girl. Well, it stacks up to this. You better be able to show Prexy Abbot some physical means of dreaming up a shining chapeau, or—" He spread large brown hands.

Dr. Earl maintained tight-lipped silence.

"That's why I barged over to take your extra-sensory test, Doc. I knew I could pass it, hands down, because I'm funny that way. Main reason, though, was to look around for magic tricks. If you had any, I could see 'em in this transparent furniture. So if Abbot asks me, I'll have to tell him. Your story better be good, because old Peebles is after you, and he can do a lot for the school."

Laine went out, and Dr. Earl remained in his seat. His slight, wiry figure slumped a little. Peebles could do a lot for the school—in President Philemon Abbot's mind, a lot more than Rodney Earl could do. Earl could be replaced, not by anyone as competent as he, but by someone who could teach from microscopic texts which Earl himself had dictated onto reading tapes.

He shook his head helplessly, then touched the tiny button of his wrist watch.

"When you hear the tone, the time will be ten-thirty eight and one-quarter."

Twenty minutes before class time. He took writing materials from his desk.

Dear Julie:

I shall see your brother in a few minutes, and heaven knows what the upshot will be. I may need help, and I know that I can count. . . .

He finished the note, punched her combination on the envelope delivery tag, and dropped it into the mail sorter as his communicator sang a mellow note.

He touched another button on his desk, and Philemon Abbot's massive features appeared in his desk prism.

"Good morning, Rod."

"Hello, Phil."

"Busy?"

"Not too."

"Drop over on your way to class. Got things to talk about."

"All right."

DR. EARL found President Abbot's broad, smooth face a mixture of quizzical seriousness and suspicion before he cut the circuit. This expression was unchanged when he sat across the compact desk from his boyhood friend.

"What's all this gupp?" Abbot demanded.

"Be a little more specific, Phil."

Abbot folded his big hands, put his square chin on the double fist. His light gray eyes were sympathetic, but his mouth curved down at one corner.

"Peebles gave me a call. Said you were using some kind of magic in your class."

"Peebles is a liar."

Abbot scratched his black thatch with troubled fingers.

"He throws a lot of weight, Rod."

Dr. Earl's mouth set. "If you're going on a witch hunt, Phil, get at it. A long time ago, as far back as the Twentieth Century, people were persecuted when odd things happened to them. We should have outgrown that by now."

"I have a right," Abbot said grimly, "to ask an explanation. I own this college. Bought it with sweat. Well, the whole thing is commercial. If you offend one of our biggest donors, I want to know why."

"We certainly must not offend wealthy idiots," Dr. Earl murmured.

"Wait a minute, Rod! Peebles has pretty much the same background as I have. I'm no idiot. My record shows that. I wanted to own this place and give to others education that I didn't get, couldn't afford. Peebles is the same. It's a blow to him when his son gets booted out of a class as a result of something that looks, to put it mildly, fishy. Why did you pull that cap of flame, and how?"

Dr. Earl fell silent. What could he say? He didn't know the answer—yet. He thought for a moment, then stood up.

"Phil, I'll tell you this. It wasn't magic. I don't know what it was. But I will know. Let me alone for a while. I'll find out and tell you. As for young Peebles—what the hell! He can come back. I really don't blame him for scoffing, but I don't like my statements questioned by an ignorant fool."

"You could hardly blame him, though, Rod. When you say that strange intelligence is just beyond our consciousness, even I want some sort of proof. And I wouldn't accept what looks like a trick." His voice lowered. "Confidentially, Rod, how did you do it?"

Dr. Earl considered.

"I can't tell you, Phil. Just let me alone for a while."

Abbot arose. "All right, but watch yourself. Remember, I put the name of Wilmart University above yours—or mine."

DR. RODNEY EARL looked at his class—and they looked back. Wariness steadied the eyes of the hundred choice students, and resentment glazed Dr. Earl's. They sat before and below him in semicircular waves under the domed skylight. By their expressions he knew they were aware of the political currents which eddied about him.

Why are they called political? he wondered. *Jackson Peebles is screaming from hurt pride, and Phil Abbot is cringing away from an injured bank account. The currents are financial, as are nearly all such currents. Peebles has threatened not to endow this or that chair if I am not removed from the faculty.*

He stepped onto the lecture podium. "I had begun yesterday to outline the course of our studies, ladies and gentlemen. I had explained to you that we were here to develop as yet untouched portions of the mind. Psychometrics is the science of psychic change, and we shall learn to control the changes.

"You have studied everything our schools have to offer in the way of psychology and psychiatry. You are now here in this post-graduate class to learn to put to use the vast information you have collected."

"How? You may ask that. There are many ways. Statistics show that chief coordinators have short business lives in the complex structure of the Twenty-sixth Century. Theirs is the main burden, for they must carry myriad details in their heads. One of the many services we can perform is to increase the useful period of such men by mental suggestion which later becomes autosuggestion, although the patient is never aware of any influence from without.

"We shall learn here to project our thoughts so that they affect the thoughts of—"

Dr. Earl broke off as the eyes of his class fixed on a spot apparently some distance above his own head. He looked up.

Slipping down the curve of the dome was a formless mass of writhing colors. Its effect on Earl was to suggest that it occupied dimensions beyond the three which were tangible. It was not dangerous in appearance, yet the short hairs rose on his neck, for it suggested evil—such evil as the human mind could not grasp.

"Go away!" he whispered. "Go away. Leave me alone!"

The twisting, changing, sparkling mass continued its steady descent until it hovered some ten feet above Dr. Earl. Here it stayed, shifting in sinuous movement—boiling, rather.

The classroom broke into uproar. Students leaped to their feet, shouting simultaneously at the slight, dark man on the podium. He raised his hands.

"Please! Let's be orderly. One at a time."

"What are you doing?" cried a steely-eyed youth. "And how? We've a right to know. If you're a charlatan, you're wasting our time."

This seemed to be the tenor of their questions, and Dr. Earl made an honest attempt to answer.

"What this—" he pointed at the overhead mass of color—"may be, I don't know. It isn't the first, nor was yesterday's. I have had these experiences for some time, and I do not know their origin. They are connected in some fashion with a projection of the mind, I believe. I say I believe, for I don't know. I am as bewildered as you."

Several rude noises came from the class.

"After all," Dr. Earl went on, "history is full of incidents which science cannot explain. Pink rains, black and poisonous fogs, falling stones, freak weather. Perhaps these incidents are caused by—" he hesitated, then decided to take the plunge and tell what he suspected—"by agencies, forces, beings which exist in some dimensional combination we can't comprehend. We have a great mass of data to support the existence of such forces—"

"Faugh!" a student in the first row exclaimed. "We didn't expect to find superstition here. And we don't like it. I thought it was an honour to be in this class. It seems I was mistaken." He strode toward the door. "You're tricking us. If it's a psychological test you're conducting, all right. But tell us the purpose, because the joke's grown stale. Any more of it is wasting my time."

"I'm telling you the truth!" Dr. Earl snapped.

The young man made his exit, and was soon followed by most of the class. A few remained, however, and gathered around his desk.

"I'm willing to string along."

"I, too."

"We're with you, Doctor."

Dr. Earl smiled.

"Thank you. If you realize that I would not tamper foolishly with your highly important education, I am happy. Class is dismissed for today, though."

THEY filed out. Dr. Earl raised his eyes. The writhing colors were gone, but an opalescent globe caught his eye, high in the arch of the dome, and a familiar sensation came stealthily into his mind.

As during the first experience of this nature, he felt—not heard—his name.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

He shut his mind to the insidious feeling, and it ceased. The opalescent globe vanished. His hands stopped sweating within a few seconds, and he set his communicator dials for Abbot's office.

When Abbot's big, grim face was in his prism, Dr. Earl said, "Phil, another of them happened."

Abbot nodded. "I know."

"Oh? Word flies, eh? I think I'd better talk to you, Phil."

"So do I, Rod."

JACKSON PEEBLES was there, choleric, heavy-jowled, small-eyed. He glared at Dr. Earl as the little man found a chair.

Abbot's face might have been chiseled from a granite mountain. "Rod, what the hell goes on?"

Peebles leaped into the breach. "I'll tell you, sir! This man relies on a smooth tongue and trickery to gain his reputation. He himself selects his students, sycophantic young fools beglamed by mental claptrap. When someone like my son dares to question, he is expelled."

"Your son is a psychic moron," Earl gritted.

Peebles sobered instantly. A shadowy smile flickered on his mouth.

"Indeed?" he purred with deadly politeness. "My friend, if you resign here and now I shall forgive you. Otherwise I fear—"

"Mr. Peebles!" Abbot cut in. "I am the head of this school. I'll run it my own way, and it isn't my way to let my teachers get shoved around. If you will permit, we'll discuss this privately."

Peebles lurched to his feet with a sur-

prising amount of dignity. "Mr. Abbot, I bid you good day—possibly goodby."

Abbot gave Earl an apologetic look when Peebles had gone. "He insisted on being present, Rod. I didn't like it, but I didn't expect outright insults. Now tell me."

Dr. Earl made a decision. Abbot was open-minded, hard-headed. He would listen intelligently.

"First of all," he began, "let me point out a few facts on thought immigration. You know that I can tell you, for example, the contents of your pockets by concentrating. My thoughts are projected until they finger, as it were, the various objects you carry with you and return their impressions to my conscious mind. You know that I can cause, by silent suggestion, certain acts on your part. You know that through heredity and scientific training in Genetics Research, Incorporated, I have mastered the science of Psychometrics, and you know the commercial possibilities of that science. Now listen."

He went on to propose that a mind, so trained and so liberated, might—might, mind you—be able to sense the existence of forces which heretofore had never been suspected.

"We have thousands of recorded hints, Phil, that they do exist. We've called them mythology, superstition, black magic, what-not. If such forces exist, it's reasonable to suppose that a mind like mine could establish contact. I suspect that such a condition is behind the phenomena which have followed me for some time."

He told of the first experience, when a glowing circle of green invaded his bedroom. He told of the feeling that his name was being called, of the queer solidity of the words, "Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl."

"I didn't hear them, I felt them. Since then such incidents have happened irregularly, without warning. Yesterday one occurred publicly, and today. That's all I know, Phil."

Abbot toyed reflectively with a polished Moon crystal paperweight for a few moments. When he raised his eyes they were thoughtful and sympathetic.

"I won't insult your intelligence, Rod, with oblique suggestions. But I do suggest, for your own good, that you take a vacation. I don't pretend to understand what you're talking about. It sound to me like hallucination."

"Publicly, in the mass?"

"I'll admit that stumps me, but I know there's some physical explanation. Maybe—I say only maybe—you thought of those things, and your students' minds, being hypersensitive, had the same illusion. But, at any rate, I think a rest will do you good. I'll make an announcement to the effect that important research prevents your teaching for the rest of the year."

"And thereby fool nobody. They'll say Peebles brought pressure to bear, and you were afraid he wouldn't kick in—which might not be far from the truth, at that."

Abbot flushed. "I won't trouble to deny that. Listen, I'm thinking of you. Regardless of what's happened to you, you ought to know. If you're cracking under strain, a rest will be just what you need. Go away and do some fishing, or visit a Moon resort. But even if what you suspect is true, you can find out privately, without embarrassment."

Dr. Earl rose. "I'm sorry for the crack. I'll take your advice."

IN the corridor again he stopped at sight of a familiar figure hurrying toward him with a determined mien. Not a pretty woman, Juliet Abbot, but loyal and full of energy.

Her long face twisted with exasperation. "That darned gravity drive is out of fix again. I couldn't land. All I could do was soar at five thousand feet until a patrol plane came and towed me in."

"Why didn't you have it fixed?"

"It will be this time," she promised, grimly. "The idea came originally from our engineering department here. I told them just now that they could fix it permanently, or I'd tear their building up by the roots and drop it in the bay. Well, I hurried as fast I could after your letter came. What have they done to you?"

"The sack."

"No! Well, I'll fix that." She started toward her brother's office, but Dr. Earl stopped her.

"Let it go, Julie. It's better this way."

"Better?" she exclaimed wrathfully. "Just when you're getting somewhere. I'm not going to let 'em get away with it!"

"Julie!" he said sharply as she moved away again. "I said let it go."

"All right, all right! Fling away everything you've worked for. What will you

do? You'll go mad, alone in that empty house of yours."

He flinched at her prophecy, wondering if it were belated. "I'll have plenty to do," he said ruefully. Finding the truth behind the phenomena would give any man plenty to do.

He was bound to know, now that he was less apprehensive of madness. Perhaps his first impression was correct—perhaps intelligent beings were attempting to establish contact by such methods as they could contrive.

"I must go," he said to Julie Abbot.

"I'll take you," she offered. "My plane ought to be ready. They put their current genius on the job. Young fellow named Laine."

"You needn't bother. I'll take an interurban."

"I know I needn't bother! I know you could take an interurban. You could walk on your hands, for that matter."

He grinned as she fell into stride beside him. Julie always talked as if she were on the verge of anger. Her words came in a surging rush, her volume level a little higher than average. She walked that way, too, her long legs reaching out for each step as if they were hungry. He hurried as they moved along a railed walk overlooking the campus a hundred feet below.

Her plane was ready, and bore a scrawled guarantee by Nelson Laine. Soon they were at 5,000 feet, between interurban and limited traffic, with the gleaming plastic city below.

Dr. Earl always felt a thrill at the panorama, and now his thrill was tinged with nostalgia, for he was no longer a part of the scene below. He had moved among the pastel domes of the university, had stood on the moving walks of the shopping district, had waited atop the interurban pylons.

Now he was exiled to suburbia. In that section of small homes beyond the gray food factories he had always felt alien. In that urban frame of the university which now lay behind them he had felt at home.

"Well?" Julie demanded tartly. "Are you going to tell your woes, or cry on your own shoulder?"

Dr. Earl started. He glanced sidewise at the strong, handsome rather than pretty face of his pilot. "I was just thinking," he said.

She pointed ahead at a small flat roof

dotted with a half-dozen planes. "Reception committee. Why don't people mind their own business? You must be up to something important."

Dr. Earl said nothing.

She frowned as she cut the drive and drifted toward the roof, competent hands flickering over the control panel. "If you won't tell me, how can I get you out of your jam?"

"I don't expect you to, Julie. Just dump me off and go on about your business."

She snorted. "Fat chance! Somebody will have to fix 'em a drink."

"I don't fancy there'll be any drinking. I hardly think my callers are socially-minded."

"Then I'll stay and listen."

"Even if I ask you to go away?"

"Even if you ask me," she snapped. "You've let yourself be booted out of your job, and heaven knows what kind of trouble you're in. You need protection, and I'm just the gal who can give it to you. Now be quiet. I've got to get this thing down." She did things with her hands, and the plane dipped and banked like a gull. "That Laine boy," she commented, "did well."

Dr. Earl recalled the interview with Nelson Laine. "He's quite a lad. Quite a lad!"

CHAPTER II

"YOU CAN'T ESCAPE!"

SIX of his ex-students were in the waiting room just under the roof. When he entered they rose like well-trained soldiers.

"Well, gentlemen?" Dr. Earl said.

"We want to continue your course," one of them said. "Can you teach us after hours? We just heard you've retired."

Dr. Earl glowed a little inside. He had a feeling of having been lost, and rescued in the nick of time.

"Miss Abbot," he said to Julie, "perhaps these gentlemen would like a small stimulant."

They murmured their acceptance, and Dr. Earl unlocked the door which led to the rest of his house. They trooped into his study and sank into chairs which fitted curves with luxurious comfort.

"We know your worth," was the theme of their remarks. "We want to follow in

PSORIASIS

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your steps. We believe Psychometrics to be one of the greatest progressive steps in history, and we wish to perpetuate and increase knowledge in this field."

And Dr. Earl, who had been lost, beamed. He loved to teach.

"I am pleased," he said. "Thanks a lot, boys. Just let me give Abbot a call. I don't expect any difficulty, but let's make sure."

Philemon Abbot offered no objection. "But, Rod, you're rather defeating the purpose of your retirement, aren't you? You wanted to know what these strange things were."

"Nonsense," Dr. Earl said. "In any case, they are not connected with my teaching."

"Good luck then. Let me know."

In the study again, Dr. Earl joined the students in a drink, and they went away full of promises to enroll others.

Dr. Earl looked at Julie Abbot, smiled into her over-bright eyes, smiled through them at the warmth which lay behind her strong, handsome exterior.

"Sit down, Julie. I think I'm going to get a little maudlin."

She did, and folded her hands loosely on her short, white skirt. Her eyes followed the little man as he paced back and forth across the Thermotex floor.

"It's hard to tell," he began.

He told her how his one aim, since before he had finished formal schooling, had been to produce measurable—and therefore scientific—results with his unusual talent; how a series of controlled experiments had finally showed him the way; how he had brought Psychometrics through empirical to scientific stages, and how Phil Abbot had established a chair for him at the university.

"I didn't do this alone," he assured her. "I'm not bragging. Many men helped me, the keenest brains we have. I was ready to give up any number of times, but something drove me on. Then, one day, when a group of chemists at the Plastico plant were trying to break down an intricate formula which had baffled research departments for years, I was able to co-ordinate their minds—and they did it. I knew where I was headed then."

He told her how the whole proposition had fallen into focus, and of his high personal happiness when Phil Abbot had seen the commercial possibilities in this new

science, and how his future had stretched before his eyes in a clear, simple pattern.

"Until yesterday," he said. "I had a foreboding when I ordered young Peebles out of my class, but he called me a liar, and I couldn't take that. My foreboding paid off to-day, and I have never felt as friendless, as useless, as discouraged. But these boys—they want me to teach them. Can you understand it, Julie? They want me to teach them!"

Her smile softened her face. "Everybody wants to be needed, Rod. But tell me what it's all about. I've heard a couple of wild rumours, but they don't make sense. Magic, for one, of all things!"

"Yes, and I know nothing of magic. As to the situation itself, however, I don't know much more. But I mean to know. I'll tell you when I do. In the meantime, I can work again. I had thought I was through."

"But how will you live, Rod? That handful of students can't pay enough to support you. You haven't any money, have you?"

"I'll get along somehow," he said non-committally. The same question had been bothering him. But with the fatalistic belief that one always comes through adversity, he pushed it aside.

AN almost supreme test of that belief was announced by the bell which marked the arrival of a visitor. Dr. Earl opened the door to the waiting room, and was confronted by a smug, satisfied Jackson Peebles.

"May I come in, sir?" Peebles asked.

Dr. Earl stood aside, and the big man entered. He bowed ceremoniously to Julie Abbot and settled his frame into a chair. He prefaced his remarks by handing Dr. Earl a legal document.

"You will notice," Peebles said pleasantly, "that this is a court order restraining you from teaching Psychometrics in any way until you can explain satisfactorily the phenomena which have occurred on the two occasions enumerated therein. Violation of the order, as you well know, will bring drastic results—to you."

Dr. Earl scanned the whereases. He raised a face which, despite his efforts at control, was stricken. "Why have you done this?"

"The truth of the matter," Peebles said conversationally, "is that I do not like

you, Dr. Earl. Through my son you have offended me and thrown aspersions on my name. I am proud of that name, for I have worked hard to bring it to its present eminence. Because of your actions, I secured that order; because of my dislike for you, I have delivered it in person."

"But, my God, man! You've stripped me. I can't explain the phenomena, and I'm not trained for any other line of work."

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk!*" Peebles clucked. "Good day, sir, and Miss Abbot."

Dr. Earl stared at the door which Peebles closed behind him.

"What hope," Earl asked bitterly, "is there for human progress as long as people put their own petty vanities above the interests of the race? He's brought to a stop one of the greatest forward strides in history because he won't admit the truth of what I said about his stupid son."

Julie Abbot rose to her feet. "I must run."

Dr. Earl fixed her with a narrowed glance.

"What are you up to?"

"Why, nothing," she said, round-eyed. "I have things to do, that's all."

"You're not usually so concerned about your program."

"Of course I am. You never notice, that's all."

"I notice a lot of things. One is your propensity for mixing into my affairs. Listen, Julie, don't get me into a worse jam. I've got trouble enough."

Her eyes grew rounder. "I wouldn't dream of it, Rod."

WHEN she had gone, Dr. Earl considered his position. He was not given to psychological generalities, yet he could not prevent his thoughts from probing human behavior. Peebles, motivated as most persons by a feeling of inferiority, had struck in his most effective manner at what he considered to be an attack on his publicly-asserted superiority.

The wisdom of Peebles' action had doubtless never entered the man's mind. He simply lashed out instinctively at whatever threatened his name, his economic standing and his pride. Dr. Earl felt on the one hand a willingness to understand and forgive, but on the other a deep resentment because his own name, economic standing and pride were threatened.

True he might go to another university, but if these strange phenomena followed him he would be accused again of trickery, charlatanism, and—fantastic though it seemed—witchcraft, for the word was not dead, it only slept.

He entertained no illusions concerning his motivation. On the surface he would fight back at something which threatened progress of the race. He would fight back here, because here his reputation was in jeopardy—these were surface reasons.

But he knew that, although his desire to continue his work, teaching and research stemmed from a real altruism, this altruism had as a driving force the same ego justification which made Peebles spiteful and vindictive.

Their differences lay in his own constructive use of the ego drive, whereas Peebles had developed a warped social will through perhaps no fault of his own.

Should he submit, from personal disinclination to battle, to this edict which emptied his life? Or should he, with a selfishness as honest as Peebles', fight back? From his own viewpoint he was a better-adjusted social animal than the industrialist-politician, more fitted to live.

Dr. Earl decided to fight.

He went out to the landing roof, where his single-passenger runabout lay ready. As he strode toward it, with outthrust jaw and half-bent arms, it vanished from sight.

He froze in a mixture of amazement and fear, for a cloud of small pebbles suddenly showered from a hole in space and obscured the plane. Their din hurt his ears, for they dropped at a velocity the eye could not follow. The air was full of a rushing sound, and with the sound of their thunder as they beat against his plane.

They had no source; that was the frightening fact. The sky, a few feet above the plane, was empty. Then, at no well-defined line, it was full of whistling rock. But the rocks were definitely tangible. They pounded the plane and bounced on the roof. A few rolled to his feet, and he kicked one to make sure it was real.

Presently the shower thinned, ceased. His plane lay flattened like a squashed insect amid the litter of pebbles. Dr. Earl scraped a path through these, examined the useless wreckage, stared overhead with troubled eyes.

A familiar sensation slid into his consciousness—a something was trying to

call to him with those phrases which seemed to have actual weight. He closed his mind angrily; the sensation faded. He went back to his study and to the communicator built into the wall.

As he reached for the dials a brilliant flash needled the communicator with a thousand holes, destroying it completely.

He leaped away from the flash and stood trembling in honest fear. The sensation stole into his mind again.

He flung it off for a second time and shut all but one channel of thought. This was not hallucination; he felt certain of that. He had probed the demolished plane, and the destruction of his communicator was actuality. He knew once more the exultation which came from knowledge that the phenomena was real, but this was overlaid by questions of their source and by an uneasy fear of solving the questions.

That source, he felt, was clamoring for recognition just outside his mind. Well, he had decided to learn the truth if he could. Why was he hesitating? He had to admit it—he was afraid.

That was why he had rationalized his determination to fight the court order. It had offered what he thought he had wanted—solitude. He now realized that he wanted solitude less than any fate he could imagine.

He tried to run out of the house, but cringed away from the sheet of flame which screened the front door as he reached for the opening switch. For a moment he regretted that this house had no windows, or any of the many exits which ancient prints showed in the architecture of older times.

Yet, even as he stood quivering, a contemptuous part of himself stood sneering to one side.

"So you're trapped in your own house," it said. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? You poor, miserable pseudo-scientist! You wanted to know. Well, why don't you?"

Gradually this part of himself came back and he marched into his study. He sat in one of the chairs and relaxed.

"All right, damn you!" he snarled. "What do you want?"

HE had a momentary impression of confused, kaleidoscopic, formless images swirling through his mind, as if the forces which had been trying to reach him were stunned by his final acquies-

cence. These steadied, focused, blanked out, and he felt the pressure and weight of words.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

"All right," he barked, "all right! Get into it."

Dr. Rodney Earl relaxed.

Fingers poked into his mind.

They felt like fingers probing with sure curiosity. They seemed hungry, threatened to clamp around his brain, and with a great effort of will he closed all but one narrow channel of reception. Their pressure eased.

An hour later, with a savage wrench of consciousness, he tore free from the stealthy probes wedging themselves into additional portions of his mind. The struggle left him weak and wet with sweat, but he was free. Then he marshaled the impressions and looked at them.

Pictures. Yes, plenty of these. But many of them had no meaning, for their forms were not the forms to which human eyes were accustomed. Pictures impossible to reconstruct.

A few were understandable. There had been a small box set in the middle of a great plain. Thought waves projected into the box wrought a great and gleaming city around it, a city of magnificent proportions and built of a material not yet known to man.

His eyes had not seen inside this city, yet he had the impression that living there was desirable above all other desires; that inside its shining towers life had fullness and meaning—and something of evil.

He tried to rationalize this feeling as the latent evil that lies in all men, but it wouldn't fit—quite. The evil—though he knew it to be only a word, or a point of view—lay outside himself, was somehow connected with the intelligence which had made diagrams for him.

As he thought of the diagrams his hands rummaged in a desk for drawing materials, and he began to transmit a series of lines to paper. He had drawn one whole section of an incomprehensible mechanism before he realized that a compulsion drove him to this activity, that it was not mere scientific curiosity.

Flushing with sudden anger, he dropped his drawing instruments and glared at the neat white and black pattern.

"If I do this," he muttered, "I'll do it

because I want to know, not because I can't help myself. Whoever you are, damn you, you won't get control of me."

Dr. Earl's mouth dropped open as another of the items which had come to him in his trancelike state now crystallized in his conscious mind—control.

Snatches of history had been communicated to him. The forces had revealed that Dr. Earl was only one of thousands whom they had tried to reach over a period of centuries. But until this moment no mind had been strong enough to withstand the shock of knowledge. That was all he had learned on this point, but it sent him scrambling out of the house.

Not until he had covered half the distance to the nearest interurban pylon did he realize that he had simply walked from the house, and had not been opposed by a sheet of flame, a shower of pebbles, or any other phenomenon. He had been forced, then, to receive the communications. They had trapped him in his own home until he listened.

His jaw set in anger. He didn't like to be shoved around.

His eyes, glazed with fury, led him subconsciously to the pylon elevator, and his seething thoughts prevented notice of fellow-passengers who were whisked to the waiting platform. He entered the interurban automatically, paid his fare and gave his destination to the pilot without ever remembering later how he had arrived at the psychopathic ward of the general hospital.

HIS reputation gained him quick entrance to a sunny wing where the patients occupied themselves in endless idiot pleasure. Ranging in age from 10 to 90, in condition from drooling happiness to blank unrealizations of an outside world, the two dozen cases played with their toys and engaged in simple pursuits.

One young man wound and unwound a bit of colored string while three of his fellows watched with rapt fascination. A middle-aged woman crawled about the floor, sniffing, sniffing. A yellowed skeleton sprawled on his bed, unmoving eyes fixed on the ceiling, his dried lips mumbling an unintelligible prayer.

When Dr. Earl entered, a few eyes shifted to note his presence, then shifted back to their business in hand.

Dr. Earl signaled his guide to leave, and

then examined these mental wrecks. He closed his mind to outside stimuli, and focused a channel of thought on one of the patients.

"Stand up!" Dr. Earl commanded silently. "Stand up!"

The patient, a vacuous girl of 25, obediently got to her feet and stood without expression.

"Count on your fingers to four," Dr. Earl directed at her with his thought beam.

The girl raised a soft, fat hand, looked at it in wonder as if she had never seen it before. She regarded it for some seconds, turning it this way and that, before she dropped it. Her face shifted slightly into an expression of fear and helpless incomprehension. She didn't understand. The problem was too complex, and she was afraid.

A greater anger began to burn in Dr. Earl's mind, and the girl whimpered. He immediately forced all emotion from himself. He had been activated for the past hour by emotion alone, which was no way for a scientist to act.

He became objective and analytical, and the girl's face once more assumed its expression of emptiness.

"Send your thoughts to me," Dr. Earl ordered.

He made his mind receptive, and it was immediately flooded with a jumble of meaningless impressions. No words, no orderly sensations, but gouts of color and amorphous forms. Once or twice he sensed combinations of color with which he had become familiar—they screamed, and seemed to occupy other dimensions than those he knew.

He allowed the girl to relax again, and turned his attention to the others. Some were not responsive, but out of the two dozen nine reacted in like manner.

Dr. Earl went out of the hospital. He knew, from wide experimentation, that those nine had high extra-sensory faculties. For some reason or other, their co-ordinated mental machinery had snapped, leaving them only those faculties with which they had been born, faculties which had nothing to do with intelligence. They knew hunger and the need to sleep. They would struggle against an attempt on their lives. Perhaps they knew a certain sex drive. Beyond this they were empty hulks, with the exception of their remarkable extra-sensory perception.

For some reason or other they had died intellectually. Dr. Earl was certain that he knew the reason—the Persecutors.

He named them consciously for the first time, for they had persecuted him in the nights and driven him near to madness. They had done more to those poor shells who played with string and sniffed at the floor.

Would they do the same to him, if he finished the diagram he had started? Had the others reached that point? Would his mind snap?

What did the Persecutors want?

REALIZATION of hunger brought him out of his curious, bewildered, angry reverie. He saw that he was on one of the city streets, and stepped aboard a moving sidewalk. He let it carry him to a public communicator booth, where he called Julie Abbot and invited her to dinner.

"Meet me at the Automat," he said. "I want no interruption from waiters."

He walked through the darkening evening and noted a few familiar faces. It was unusual for passers-by to register in his memory, but their expressions were unusual. They gave him not even a nod, and on one occasion a perfect stranger shrank away as he passed.

Dr. Earl examined his clothing, but it seemed in condition. He was at a loss to understand the stony eyes, the unrelaxed mouths, the shrinking away. Had he been marked in his short brush with the Persecutors? A quick examination in a mirror assured him on this point. He looked like other men.

Then why?

Julie Abbot answered this after they had picked up a drink and carried it to their booth.

They passed through the stile, put the drinks on their table, and she said, "It's started."

Dr. Earl punched their orders on the teletype. "What's started?"

"The rumor that you're familiar with witchcraft. I traced it pretty well back to Peebles. I fixed him, all right. It may grow, but he'll have no more to do with it. He may even help to stamp it out."

Dr. Earl frowned a question.

"I told him," she said, grinning, "that you'd got hold of a tremendous power secret, something that would revolutionize present systems. He practically frothed.

He'll be around trying to buy it, if I know him."

Dr. Earl glared. "I told you to stay out of this, Julie."

She grinned across the table, sipped her drink. "So I hit it on the nose, eh? You're a sly dog, Rod. Well, why don't you sell it to him?"

Dr. Earl groaned. "I haven't been through enough today! I asked you to dinner because I wanted to relax and forget what has happened to me." He paused, considered. "No, I'll be honest with you. I wanted to talk, and since you've brought it up, I'll tell you the whole thing. You're the only person I can trust completely."

She flushed with pleasure. A soft tone sounded in the wall before she could answer, and they lifted their glasses. A panel slid back, and a tabletop, set for two, slid onto their own tabletop. It held their orders, and they began to eat.

During the meal Dr. Earl told her the story from the beginning. His suspicions and his conclusions he detailed, his experiences of the afternoon, and his visit to the hospital.

"They weren't congenital idiots, Julie. I know their histories. They lost coordinated control of their minds at various ages. The nine who had E.S.P. were outstanding in one line or another before mental processes degenerated. That girl, for example, was a mathematical genius. Now she can't count to four. I suspect they were natural mutations, with higher extra-sensory ratings than mine."

She had listened without comment, almost without motion. Now she broke in.

"Give it up, Rod."

He finished his meal, brows furrowed in thought. When she had finished he signaled for the table to be removed, and waited until it had slid back into the wall.

"That's my problem, Julie. What to do."

"Give it up," she repeated. "It's this feeling of evil you describe. It gives me the shivers. They're up to no good."

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "Do you know medieval history? About a thousand years ago white men came to this country. The aborigines—what were they called, Indians?—probably regarded them with misgivings. But the superior culture absorbed the primitive, and brought civilization to where it is to-day."

"And what became of the aborigines?"

she asked dryly. "The white men were certainly evil from their standpoint."

"But the race advanced, Julie. Humanity rose to a higher level."

"So you want to let us be wiped out for the good of—what?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know what they want, and I think I won't know until I build the mechanism for which they gave me diagrams."

"If you'll take my hunch, you'll tear 'em up, my lad."

"I'll tell you the truth. My emotional nature says to hell with them, whatever they are. Perhaps they've destroyed the useful minds of thousands in their attempts to accomplish their purpose. That angers me, naturally. But my natural curiosity asks what they are, who they are. And my ego tells me that I won't crack, that I can throw them aside if they get too strong."

"I've seen drunks like that," she said. "Oh, no, one more wouldn't hurt 'em. Five minutes later they had to be scraped off the floor."

"You may be right," Dr. Earl conceded. "But I've gone too far. I think I have to know. Here's another thing. If I quit now, what will they do to me? I can't let haloes of flame follow me all the rest of my life."

"It'd be handy for frying eggs," she commented. "Look, my aging sweet. I don't think you're crazy. I'm almost a committee of one, though. From the way you told your story, I believe it. And I say skip it. Tell these Persecutors, as you call them, to troop back to whatever hell they hatched in. That's my advice. If you won't follow it—and who does, ever?—then I'm with you. I won't blab, and I'll help."

Dr. Earl smiled, felt a wrench at his heart.

"Thanks, kid. But I don't want you in it. It may be dangerous."

"Did I ask? Do I care?" She cupped a hand behind her ear. "Where's that darned echo gone to? It ought to answer no."

"At any rate," he said sternly, "you're to stay out of it. That's final."

She merely grinned.

"I'd better go," he said. "I want to think it over."

HE put coins in the stile slot, and it opened to let them through. As they emerged onto the sidewalk, several persons were grouped beside the door. One of them spat at Dr. Earl.

Before Dr. Earl could raise a hand, Julie had kicked the man on his bare shin. He yelled in agony, and hopped back on the other foot.

"Next time I'll raise my sights," Julie warned grimly. "Anybody else interested?"

Dr. Earl pushed her aside and faced the small group. "If you are interested," he grated, "come on, one at a time or all together."

He took a step forward and they backed away from him. Hatred flickered in their eyes, but fear showed there, too—whitely. Julie took Dr. Earl by the arm.

"Come on, Rod," she whispered. "Let's get away from here. We don't want trouble."

He hung back until the group dispersed, then fell into step. "So it's begun," he murmured. "Superstition lies near the surface, doesn't it?"

She spoke urgently. "Where's your plane? Oh, I forgot. Well, take mine. I don't want you in an interurban crowd. They might hurt you. You beat it home, and I'll round up a few of the boys to come out and guard you. Then I'll see Jackson Peebles and make him stop this snow-balling rumor. But you stay home till I come, will you? Promise?"

"Nonsense," he said. "This isn't the Dark Decade."

"That was a sample, stupid. If there'd been more in the crowd, I might have had to really sock a few. You do what I say, hear? Maybe you're right, but I'd feel better if you did it my way."

"When you put it like that, Julie, all right."

He was soon high above the city, with the image of Julie's worried eyes in his mind. He tried to shrug it away, but a part of her concern communicated itself to him.

Sure this was the Twenty-sixth century, but atavism was as old as man himself. Would any amount of time wipe it out? Or would it lie there, ready to spring forth and demolish all progress?

Yesterday he would have laughed scornfully. Now he was not so certain.

CHAPTER III

EVIL INCARNATE

the wreckage of his own, was there. He eyed this cautiously as he landed, saw that it was a single-passenger runabout, and relaxed. He could handle one person.

That person was Jackson Peebles, be-jowled, small-eyed, but full of ponderous joviality. He lumbered to his feet and held out a friendly hand.

"Doctor, I want to apologize, sir. I'd like to be your friend."

Dr. Earl took the big, soft hand. Even though he knew the fat man's motives, and even though the creature was unpleasant to the eye, Dr. Earl was grateful for this show of friendliness. It seemed so long since yesterday, when he could not have counted his friends with less than three figures.

"Come in, Mr. Peebles."

When they were in his study he asked, "Drink?"

"Charmed, sir, charmed."

Dr. Earl mixed two tall ones in his little kitchen, and found Peebles examining the unfinished diagram when he returned.

"So this is it, Doctor?" Peebles turned a beaming purple face which seemed about to burst with genial chagrin. "You certainly put it over on us, sir. I tell you, that was mighty cute, sir, mighty cute. Well—" he accepted the drink, saluted—"to mutual pleasure and, if I might add, profits."

Chuckling, he swallowed half the drink under Dr. Earl's amused eyes.

"As you might guess, Doctor, I come with offers as well as apologies. Mighty handsome offers, too, if I say so myself. You may name your price, Doctor."

"I have nothing to sell, Mr. Peebles."

Peebles blinked. "Then I'll double your price. Put a name to it, I'll match it again."

"But I have nothing to sell."

Peebles was patiently insistent. "Now, come, my good fellow. Every man has a price. After what has been reported to me about your invention—though God knows where you keep it—I'm willing to stake everything I have on its development."

"I have no invention."

"Then what's this drawing? Answer me that!"

"It's a private matter which I can't discuss."

Peebles pursed pendulous lips, then eyed Dr. Earl with porcine shrewdity. "So Plastico beat me to you, eh?"

Dr. Earl shrugged impatiently. "I'm telling you the truth. I have no invention;

HE banked the plane toward his roof and saw that another, in addition to

I have nothing for sale. I have made no deal with anyone, nor shall I."

"I'll make you president of the company," Peebles said persuasively. "I'll double any offer you get elsewhere. I'll give you twenty-eight per cent—no, by damn, twenty-nine per cent of the capital stock. I'll name the company after you. How's that? Earl Power Company. Neat, eh?"

Dr. Earl sighed. "Sit down and finish your drink. I don't know how to convince you. However, I have a matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Peebles sank into a chair. "What is it?"

Dr. Earl told him of the rumor. "I don't know where it came from; I don't care. I do know that whatever I have done has a natural explanation. There isn't any touch of witchcraft. I know nothing of such things, and I don't believe in them. I'm a scientist. I must be able to measure something before I believe in its existence, although my particular science causes me to be less skeptical, more willing to accept a fact and then prove it, than others. But I do not believe in magic, black, green, or yellow. Yet this rumor has started, and has reached proportions which threaten my reputation. I need help to stop it."

Peebles curled his broad mouth in a smile. "You shall have my aid, sir. A few hints on the tremendous importance of your invention will quiet any rumors. What do you call your machine, Doctor?"

"Honestly," Dr. Earl pleaded, "I don't have an invention."

Peebles rose. "All right, Doctor, if you need time to think on my offer, you shall have it. Remember, though, that I shall feel very strongly if your machine gets into other hands, very strongly. As you said, I am influential."

Dr. Earl gave up. "All right, I promise it won't get into other hands. But you will take care of that other matter?"

"Certainly, certainly," Peebles held out his hand. "The moment you are ready to turn the plans over to me I shall scotch any and all rumors about you. In the meantime, no harm will be done."

"But listen! Harm can be done, a great deal of it. Such a thing can spread like a whirlwind."

"You exaggerate; I am sure of it."

Chuckling, Peebles went out on the landing roof, and Doctor Earl heard his plane swish off into the night.

THE diagram lay on his desk, and before he was quite aware of what he was doing Dr. Earl had added what appeared to be another section of the drawing. He came to himself with a start and flung off the compulsion which pushed orderly lines out of his memory without volition of his own.

He sat glaring at the maze of symbols, resolved not to touch it again until the impulse came from within himself instead of from the Persecutors.

Considering it thus objectively, his curiosity asserted itself. He knew that whatever resolutions he might make, he must know the answer. He tried to define this desire, to decide whether it was his alone, but was unable to do so. He only knew that it was there.

He also knew that he needed sleep. He yawned, rose and headed for his bedroom. After a couple of steps he halted in astonishment. His dark eyes blinked.

He was no longer sleepy.

This was not the restless wakefulness of insomnia, which does not remove a single ache from tired muscles nor refresh the weary mind. This was the feeling which comes after sound, dreamless sleep.

Here was the result which science had been seeking for centuries, and it had come to him from—somewhere. He analyzed his feeling, seeking some note of falsity, some evidence that his freshness was spurious, induced by inner nervousness. It was not so.

He was calm, rested, ready to tackle his work anew. His curiosity shook off its previous lethargy and pushed him back to his desk. He picked up his drawing tools.

Caution, however, held his hand. What ulterior motive lay behind this circumstance? Why were the Persecutors so apparently anxious to have this drawing finished?

He relaxed, opened his mind.

Instantly an opalescent globe, such as he had seen in his classroom, appeared near the ceiling, and the pressure of words came: "Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

He did not actually speak in reply, nor did he receive phrases. But all the elements of conversation were there. The impressions which came to him translated into meaning as crisp and concise as well-written language.

"I won't go any further until I know

who you are and what you want," Earl's mind said.

"This is acceptable," came the reply. "You've tricked me, and I don't like it. You've caused me trouble, and I don't like that. You've persecuted me."

No answer to this.

"Who are you?" Dr. Earl asked.

"You have no terms with which to describe our history."

"Where are you then?"

"In a time dimension you cannot understand."

"What do you want?"

"We wish to enter your dimension."

"Who's stopping you?"

"The minds of men unable to grasp our existence. Once they are conscious of us, we may take our places among them."

Dr. Earl closed his mind to consider. He looked up at the shining globe and tried to fit it into the scheme of things as man knew them. He could not.

Cynicism, gained through years of psychological and psychiatric experience, held him aloof from accepting the impressions he was receiving at their face value. His experience indicated that whenever any person takes the initiative in a project, that person has something to gain if the project comes off successfully. Were these intelligences the same?

"What will you gain by this?" he asked.

"Experience," came the answer.

"And what will we—the human race—and I gain?"

"Life."

"We have life."

"But not for long, Rodney Earl. Yours is a dying planet."

"We'll go to other planets when necessary. But that won't be for millions of years, and I won't care by then."

The answer to this fairly crackled. "Such short-sightedness will put your race in a position all too familiar to us. Your Psychozoic age will run its course, on this planet or another. Your life form will become extinct unless you guard for the future. Yours alone is the responsibility, for you alone have the mental strength to comprehend. All the others failed."

"And why won't I fail?"

"You may. But a strong factor in your favor is that your perceptive sense is trained. Not so the others."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Build the mechanism. Transmit to the

world the images which appear on its screen. You shall be rewarded personally, as will your race."

"What kind of reward?"

"You have no terms to describe."

Dr. Earl pursed his lips. "Then I'm buying a pig in a poke? I risk my sanity for some vague reward I can't understand."

"You already have a hint of reward. You no longer will need sleep."

"Not ever?"

"Not ever."

"It seems to me I'll be lonesome as hell at night."

No reply to this.

"I'll think it over," Dr. Earl continued.

"Will you leave me alone?"

"Yes. You will be protected."

"I don't need protection."

Again there was no reply.

The impressions ceased; the opalescent globe vanished. Dr. Earl was alone, at the beginning of a three-day period of abstraction.

DURING those days his bodyguard arrived, four young men who stayed in his waiting room, were excessively polite to him at mealtimes, and who kept all visitors away except Julie Abbot.

She came twice, once to get her plane, the other to report an increased intensity in the feeling against him. But Dr. Earl took little notice of her presence or her report. He was in the throes of an indecision which occupied all his time.

This was literally true, since he was no longer sleepy. He spent the hours weighing all the factors as he knew them.

On the one hand he might be the victim of a neurosis. His very indecision pointed to that possibility.

On the other hand it might be true.

In this event he must make a decision. He must either sever relations with the Persecutors or build the machine.

He tried in his mind to forecast results. If he renounced further contact with the strange intelligences, could he withhold himself? They had dogged him with phenomena which tagged him as a witch doctor. Would they do so again?

But if he built the machine, one of two results would be attained: the Persecutors would gain their ends, or nothing at all would happen. If he had dragged this whole sequence of experience from some

psychic corner of his mind, nothing would happen. But if the Persecutors were real, then what?

He had two considerations, himself and the human race. He was cynical enough to recognize the unimportance of the human race, except to itself, in the vast scheme of things. This cold cinder upon which it lived was an infinitesimal dot in a great universe which, itself, may have come about by cosmic accident. If the human race died off, who would care? Who would know?

The Persecutors had spoken of short-sightedness and conditions with which they were familiar. Had they once lived on a planet? If so, this was the first anybody had heard about it. The universe continued its rush through space; the Earth continued to revolve; summer came and went, and the sun grew smaller, age after age. If a race had vanished from some speck in the cosmos, the extinction had produced no observable result.

In consideration of his own life and well-being, Dr. Earl cast up a profit and loss account. He stood a chance to lose his mind, as had those wrecks in the hospital. On this side of the account also was the possibility of being enslaved by forces he did not fully comprehend.

He knew nothing of the Persecutors, granting their existence. What he had learned had been given him in terms he could grasp. What lay beyond that?

One point which bespoke caution was that in his last communication with them the feeling of evil was gone. He sensed nothing inimical to him or his race, and this had been a strong factor in former contacts. Was this a deliberate move on their part, or did it mean that with understanding came uncolored acceptance?

He did not believe in evil incarnate. Evil was only a word, definable from a strict point of view. If an event wrought harm to A as a result of B's action, then B was evil from A's viewpoint, but not necessarily so from B's.

Had the Persecutors converted him, then, to their viewpoint?

He considered also the possibility of mental fission. Practice of Psychometrics was new, and he had no reason to doubt that conscious projection of thought impulses might bring about a cleavage of the mind.

If this had happened to him, it was

conceivable that one part of such a divided mind was capable of activity neither he nor anybody else could understand—capable of producing mass illusion, of falling rocks? He shrugged. The rocks had seemed real and solid, but he had only the evidence of his senses to justify the assumption.

If those senses were impaired or transmuted, he was perhaps incapable of judgment.

On the third day he shook off his inward struggle.

"This is silly!" he said aloud in his study. "I will either build the damned thing or I won't."

He made his decision abruptly, sat at his desk and began to draw again. Even as he did so he wondered how much of this decision was his own.

HE looked up from the machine as a knock sounded on his laboratory door.

"Well?"

One of the young men poked a blond head through. "Mr. Peebles is here again, Doctor."

"Tell him to go away."

The blond head vanished, and Dr. Earl stood back to look at the finished product. He had spent seventy-two hours in its construction and was as fresh as if he had done no work at all. The revitalizing qualities which he had gained from the Persecutors constantly amazed him. If they could pass them on to the world. . . .

He laid no claim to understanding this mechanism his hands had wrought. Materials had appeared when he needed them, and he had assembled the parts according to the diagram. As he neared the finish he began to wonder why he thought of it as a machine, for it had no moving parts nor any discernible source of power.

It stood shining and inanimate, an inch higher than his own head, ready to be activated by the throw of its switch. Now was the time. Now he could know.

He could not bring himself to throw the switch. The image or images which would appear on that screen might change the course of history, and he did not want the responsibility.

Dr. Earl sat down and looked at the machine. He became lost in another inward struggle and did not hear the door

open. His first realization of Peebles' presence came when the big man spoke in a friendly and hearty voice.

"Very pretty, Doctor. Very pretty indeed."

Dr. Earl started, stared.

"How did you get in here?"

Peebles chuckled. "Your boys are reasonable and loyal. You said to throw me out; they wanted to. But they wanted more to see you collect benefits that are rightly yours. So this is the model, eh?" Peebles walked around the machine, appraising it with his little eyes.

"Stay away from that! Don't touch it!"

Peebles' jowls lost some of their flabbiness in an amused smile. "Of course not, Doctor." He stooped and looked under the machine. "Where's its source of power?"

"It hasn't any. Please go, Mr. Peebles. I have work to do."

Peebles straightened, stroked his soft chin, and eyed Dr. Earl thoughtfully. "If it has no source, it costs nothing to run. Whatever it delivers is pure profit. Doctor, you've done it! I knew it would happen sometime, but I never dreamed I'd be on the ground floor. How much, sir, how much?"

Dr. Earl made a great effort to remain calm. "Please, Mr. Peebles. Please get the hell out! This is not an invention; it is not a power machine; it is not for sale. If you don't go, I'll have you ejected."

His voice ended on a higher note, and he forced his hands to unclench. *I am near hysteria*, he thought. *This won't do.*

Peebles stood before the machine. "All right, Doctor, I'll go. I'm sorry you won't make a deal. But I shall have one satisfaction. I'll see what happens when you throw this switch."

Dr. Earl started out of his chair, but too late to halt Peebles' fat fingers.

BOTH men drew a gasping breath, and Peebles staggered back from the image that filled the screen. Dr. Earl paid no more attention to the fat man; he knew that he must smash this mechanism beyond repair.

He couldn't remove his eyes from the screen with its nerve-shattering image.

It pictured a bottomless void, from which came an endless repetition of formless forms. These were *outrè*, beyond experience and beyond comprehension.

They were a stench in the nostrils, an

abomination in the mouth, a crawling on the skin; strange odors, strange tastes, and sensations of madness.

His mind, trained to divide itself among many tasks, now divided for the work in hand. The executive portion ordered his hands to find a bar and smash the machine; the analytical examined the screen; the emotional recoiled under wave after wave of loathing.

Above and beyond these feelings was desire. He fought the impulse to idolatry with every savage ounce of strength. And even as he fought he felt his will seeping away, felt the steady emergence of this loathsome desire.

At the breaking point his hands found the bar and, with the strength of alien hatred, brought it down on the screen and its parent mechanism.

He stood gasping with weakness among the ruins, pulling gouts of air into his panting lungs. His hands were paralyzed from strain, and he dropped the bar. He staggered to his chair, dropped his head on crossed arms.

After ten seconds of silence a sound more sickening even than the images tied knots in Dr. Earl's stomach muscles.

"G-I-I-I-I. G-I-I-I-I."

It was a crooning, a baby sound in the voice of a grown man.

Dr. Earl raised his dark eyes slowly to see Peebles now a great empty hulk, squatted among the wreckage, fingering a bit of bright metal with simple, idiot glee. He did nothing with the shining fragment; it was obvious that he didn't know what it was. It was simply bright, and he was pleased.

He just looked at it and gurgled.

Dr. Earl had not liked the man. He had found him unpleasing to the eye. Now he found him heartbreaking. Peebles had no mind. That was plain.

Surging self-hatred swept up from Dr. Earl's heart. He had submitted against his judgment to the blandishments of evil incarnate. He could not rationalize; he could not analyze his conduct; he could only hate it.

Peebles had been no great asset to society, true. But he had been a man, cast in the same mold as the others. Dr. Earl felt that he had taken the man's identity away, and he had no right.

He watched Peebles for another ten seconds, playing among the shattered parts

of the machine, before he rose and fumbled towards the door. He stuck his head out, called weakly for his bodyguard.

They came with a rush, those four young men, ready for trouble. When they saw Peebles they froze in horror; one, the youngest, ran away, ill.

"What happened, Doctor?"

"Are you hurt?"

"Did he attack you?"

Dr. Earl waved a weak hand.

"Take him home," he muttered. "Please take him home, poor mindless devil."

Dr. Earl saw their loyalty ebb away, to be replaced by a glint of suspicion, mixed with fear. They had seen Peebles enter. He had been hearty, persuasive, pleasant. They took away a mindless shell, flaccid without will, and with a face that would continue to haunt them.

DR. EARL sat in his chair again, tried to steady his whirling thoughts. He achieved only nausea. His trained mind, which had stood where Peebles had fallen, failed him for the moment.

And at that moment the Persecutors struck again.

"Rodney Earl, Rodney Earl!"

The opalescent globe was there, gleaming with a brighter, angrier light.

Dr. Earl flung his head to one side, tried to shut his mind. His will was almost strong enough, but not quite, not quite. Desire came through, desire to rebuild the machine. He had turned to the diagram before, with a desperate effort, he shut his mind completely.

He was frightened. Sooner or later, he knew, the Persecutors would force him again to build the evil machine. They had too great a hold on him now. He could not stave them off forever. He could not maintain this tense barrier to their entry into his mind.

Flight? To where?

To another city? To New York, San Francisco, London, to be lost among their millions?

He should not be lost. They had sought him out here; they would follow wherever he went.

To the middle of some great desert, or ocean, away from humanity?

Wastes and emptiness offered no obstacles to them. They had given him materials, here in his laboratory; they

could force him to build their diabolical machine again.

Should he lock himself in his room and fight it out with them? He pondered on this. Since he no longer slept, it would mean a twenty-four-hour tension each day, end on end. He knew, with a bitter realization of human frailty, that he could not defy them for any appreciable period. They, on the other hand, were apparently ageless, and would clamor to the end of his time for entry into his mind.

He came reluctantly to a final decision. He cringed from the thought of self-destruction, for his experience indicated that suicides were at least temporarily out of focus. Some aberration, realized or not, drove them to take their own life.

He did not wish to follow that pattern. His mind and its peculiar qualities set him apart from other men, and innate egoism pushed thoughts of suicide away.

He could not forecast the effect of the Persecutors on the human race, but he was convinced—because of his compulsion to idolize them—that their advent would mark the end of freedom. He, Dr. Earl, was small enough sacrifice, then. His life was forfeit for the liberty of others.

Even then he could grin at himself wryly. The noble gesture. Or was he suffering from the same aberration which had caused other men to blow their heads away with a blaster?

Blaster? He had none. Peaceful citizens had no need of them. He thought over items in his household which could be converted into lethal weapons.

There was the bar. He could kill another with it, but he doubted if he could bang himself on the head hard enough to split his skull. He had an assortment of knives, but the knife was messy. Poison? No, for the pain would drive him to find an antidote, and he might wind up with nothing more than stomach ulcers.

His resolution was already weakening, and he steeled himself against capitulation. He thought of the method then. It was quick, painless, and required only enough courage to jump off his landing roof onto his head.

HE hurried outside and stood for a second on the rail near his plane, in its welter of pebbles. He wasted no sentimental last glances at his home town, no last thoughts of dear friends.

He dove, head first.

He floated. The sensation was like lying on an air mattress, for the pressure which held him up was nearly as solid. Not quite as solid, for he wafted downward gently as a tumbling leaf and landed, without a bruise, on the lawn. He jumped to his feet, cursing silently as a phrase of the Persecutors came back to him: *You will be protected.*

Then, not feeling at all funny, he broke into a high, nervous giggle. His suicide attempt had been so anticlimactic that he could not suppress a shudder of hysterical laughter.

He sobered quickly, looked around to see if any of his neighbours had witnessed his soaring descent. Yes, there was a spectator, a small boy by his gate, who looked at him with incredulous, open-mouthed awe.

They stared at each other, Dr. Earl and the boy.

"Do it again," he boy said.

Dr. Earl walked shamefacedly past the boy and headed for the Abbots. The boy padded along beside him.

"Say, Mister, that sure was pretty. I wish I could do it. Will you show me, will you, huh?"

Dr. Earl said nothing. The boy clamored for a few yards more, then gave up.

"Bet you had wires or something," he flung after Dr. Earl.

The doctor became grim again. His grimness increased when the few people he met shied away. His neighbors had been wont to speak pleasantly; now they spoke not at all. They looked away. They crossed the street to avoid a meeting. Dr. Earl hurried.

Philemon Abbot was at home, and his gray eyes darkened with concern as Dr. Earl entered his study.

"You look like the last day of a week-end in hell, Rod."

Dr. Earl twisted a smile. "You're not so far wrong, Phil. I want you to do something for me, and I don't want you to tell Julie."

"Gladly. What is it?"

"I want you to kill me, Phil."

Philemon Abbot's broad, smooth face did not change. He waited.

"You'll have a perfect alibi," Dr. Earl went on. "Self defense. For I'm going to attack you after I tell you what has happened. Since I last saw you—"

He told Abbot of the Persecutors, how he had listened, what he had learned, what he had done, and his conclusion that he was too dangerous to humanity to be allowed to live. He told of Peebles, and of his suicide attempt.

"I can't hold out much longer, Phil. My mind is tightly closed against them, but I'll break down eventually. You've got to knock me off before they get to me again. It's vital! I can't overestimate its importance."

Abbot said quietly, "If you couldn't kill yourself, what makes you think they'd allow me to?"

"I'm not certain," Dr. Earl said. "But you've got to try. I have a hunch that they can't tell what you'll do next, because you don't have E.S.P. Julie has it slightly, but not controlled. That's why I didn't want her here. My mind is closed to them, so I don't think they have any idea of what we're doing."

"Then how did they know you were killing yourself?"

"I have an answer. Understand, this is all guesswork, but it seems reasonable. I probably relaxed when I jumped, and they got through. Please, Phil, I can't hold out."

A murmur of voices drifted through the front wall from the street. The murmur grew louder and was punctuated with angry shouts. Philemon Abbot rose and opened a panel. He looked out.

He turned, beckoned Dr. Earl.

"Come here, Rod."

Dr. Earl joined him. Gathering at Abbot's gate was a mob. Dr. Earl realized with a shock that such a group had not walked the earth for centuries. He knew it for a mob from his studies of history, for it had a feel. Hard-eyed men and women bent on a single errand seethed before the gate and shouts arose.

"He went in here!"

"Well, somebody do something!"

Someone in the crowd talked about "flying through the air," and another cried, "Poor Mr. Peebles," but the complete remarks were lost in the general hubbub.

Dr. Earl turned to Abbot. "They'd make short work of me, but I'd rather have you do it, Phil. If you won't, I'll walk out and be—lynched, I think is the old term."

Abbot took him by the arm. "Come on."

He led Dr. Earl through his study into the next room. This was dark, and was

quickly darker for Dr. Rodney Earl, for Philemon Abbot swung a long right to the point of the little man's chin, lashed him with stout cord, bundled him into a plane and whisked him off to the hospital.

CHAPTER IV

SOUL FIRES OF THE DAMNED

DR. EARL recovered in a bed. He was alone in a sunny room, but was in a strait jacket. He lay perfectly still.

He knew what had happened, and he knew despair. Phil Abbot had thought he was mad, had brought him here for observation. Each moment's delay increased his danger, and the world's danger. He held his mind tight shut. The Persecutors must not reach through again. Somehow he would find a way to kill himself.

The door opened to admit Harvey Flood, a former psychology student of Dr. Earl's, now one of the staff psychiatrists. The young man's face flushed with embarrassment, but his eyes and hands were impersonal.

"Hello, Dr. Earl."

"Dr. Flood. This jacket isn't necessary."

"Right-o," the young man said, and freed the patient.

Dr. Earl flexed his arms. "Somebody pulled that a little too tight. Now look here, Doctor. You'll want to give me some reaction tests, I assume, but I tell you now I'm not mad. I have a job to do, and it must be done. You must help me."

Harvey Flood sat, gave Dr. Earl a cigarette, lit one himself. "Suppose you tell me about it, sir."

"No," Dr. Earl said. "You have a certain amount of E.S.P., and I feel that such men are dangerous. Not to the extent I am, but still—" He paused. "It's this way. As long as you don't know what I know you're safe, I imagine. But if certain information comes into your possession, you would adjust yourself to meet it—and be lost."

"Abbot gave me a story about other-dimensional life," Flood said. "But it didn't hang together very well."

"I doubt if Phil heard much that I said. He's convinced that I'm mad. He's safe. I believe his sister is safe, too, for her E.S.P. is rudimentary. But give me your tests. Convince yourself of my normalcy. Then I'll ask you to do something."

Dr. Flood complied. He put Dr. Earl through the most exacting series of tests that science had been able to devise. The laboratory worked on his blood, spinal fluid, and other specimens.

"Well," Harvey Flood said three days later, "I can't do anything but send you home, Doctor. So far as we can determine you're perfectly all right, physically and mentally."

"I was sure of it," Dr. Earl replied.

"You mentioned a favor, sir."

Dr. Earl had intended to ask young Flood to inject an overdose of evapin into his circulatory system and put the cause of death down to weak heart. But during those three days his perspective had changed.

He had submitted to the tests with a blank mind, so that nervous reaction would not be affected by mental tension. But in the nights, when sleep came to all but himself and nurses who whispered about on antiseptic feet, he had done a great deal of thinking.

He realized first of all that he was no different from other men except that his mind had peculiar qualities and the degree to which he could control those qualities. Indeed, his intelligence quotient was no higher than average. Harvey Flood, for example, had a higher I.Q. than himself.

He was therefore assuming a great responsibility in denying the Persecutors from entering this world, or, for that matter, allowing them to enter—when his decision was based only on his own reactions. They had appeared evil in their manifestations to himself and, apparently, to Peebles.

But Dr. Earl recalled the classic story of the drunk who, by some miracle of timing, had stowed away on the first exploratory ship to the moon. The crew had found him two days out. He didn't know where he was; he was hungry and he had an historic hangover. Strictly as a gag, they kept him stewed to the eyes during the whole trip and told him nothing of their destination. When they sobered him up and gave him a look at the bleak wastes he had fallen over dead.

Now the moon was not evil, but sight of its strangeness had stopped the heart of a man who had not expected it. Perhaps that had been the trouble with Peebles. The images on that screen were completely outside the experience pattern of humanity

—except, perhaps, those who had reacted in a like manner and now were in mental wards.

In order to determine whether they were innately evil, Dr. Earl felt that he must observe their effect on someone who had no preconceived notions of good or evil, no conditioning to the social matrix of their time. The ideal subject would be a baby, but how to find one with sufficient E.S.P. to sense their existence? That method was too long and arduous.

The idiot girl in this hospital would answer the purpose. It was clear that her memory was gone. She had been a mathematical genius; now she could not count.

He felt that he owed this experiment to himself and to the world. It was possible that the Persecutors were strange rather than evil, and that they could bestow many benefits on humanity. Had they not made sleep unnecessary for him?

"I WANT to conduct an experiment," he told Harvey Flood. "You have a girl here." He described her, and asked for a private and sound-proof room. Dr. Flood assented and made the arrangements.

In the room Dr. Earl was very gentle with Lisa Roman. He projected a stream of quiet thought commands to her, and her empty face soon relaxed, her fat hands stilled.

As he had worked in the Plastico plant with chemists who solved a difficult problem, he now worked with the girl and the Persecutors. In the plant he had acted as a channel of communication. The receptive portion of his mind picked up impressions of the workers, and the projective portion transmitted to the others, without Dr. Earl himself being aware consciously of the impressions.

So now he opened his mind, after three days of holding off the Persecutors, and let their impressions flow through to Lisa Roman.

The effect on her was instantaneous. She sat up on the couch and pleasure brought life to her vacuous features. Her blue eyes lighted, like a dog that knows it is about to be fed. Her loose lips stiffened, and Dr. Earl saw that she had a pretty, sensitive mouth. Her hands seemed to be slimmer and firmer. Happiness and desire were written plainly upon her.

Dr. Earl broke the contact. Idiocy came back to the girl, the hopeless unknowing.

Dr. Rodney Earl felt as if an intolerable burden had been lifted from his heart. The girl, who no longer knew good from evil, had been happier while receiving impressions from the Persecutors. What those impressions were he had no way of knowing, for he was merely the channel; but he accepted the fact of her happiness as partial evidence that they were not dangerous.

Only the question of how he might explain the public phenomena and Peebles' loss of mental faculties remained. One thing he knew; the means by which the Persecutors should be revealed to the world must not be their machine. He could build another, yes, but he could not face the images on the screen again. The human mind could take only so much.

He opened receptive channels and felt his name come through.

"Where have you been, Rodney Earl? Why did you destroy the projector?"

"Never mind about that!" was his thought response. "I have decided to cooperate."

Instantly diagrams flooded his perceptions. The same diagrams he had seen before. With these came the same compulsion to draw. He shook his head.

"I won't; I can't! You must give me some other way. I can't go through that again. If you want to become known to others, you must tell me another way. The images on that screen would drive the whole world mad."

"Those worth saving should survive."

"They must all survive, or the deal is off. You can kill me now, if you like, but I must have your promise that nobody else will die. God knows how many minds have snapped because of you. I won't have any more. That's final."

"The projector is best. It is suitable to our needs."

"But not to mine! You'll do it my way, or find another stooge."

FOR a few seconds he fought with every vestige of willpower against an almost overwhelming urge to do their bidding. Sweat stood out on his forehead, and his hands grew rigid. Then, weakening, he shut his mind and stood panting. He rested.

Presently he allowed impressions to come through again, and felt ineffable peace steal over him. All was serene, and

even the quality of communications was subtly restful.

"We shall use this girl, and others like her. Through you, Rodney Earl, we must operate. You will let us through to her."

He looked at Lisa Roman. She lay on the couch, eyes dull and blank, rubbing her hospital uniform with one thumb and forefinger. He allowed the Persecutors to reach her through his mind.

Her face became animated once more. She got to her feet in one incredibly graceful motion. Even if he had wished, Dr. Earl could not have moved his eyes from her face.

It had been an empty face before, but it had been human. Now it was not. It was a woman's face, but it was not human. Yes, there were eyes, glowing with inner fires. There was a mouth, almost smiling. There were teeth.

Dr. Earl had been told of lusts that could not be satiated, of soul fires that were unquenchable. Privately he had doubted their existence, but now he knew that he was wrong. For the face on Lisa Roman now reflected such lusts and such fires as she regarded Dr. Earl with an expression of unholy triumph.

Had she spoken, had she ordered him to any task, he would have obeyed. The feeling of adoration, unclean but nonetheless adoration, which the screen images had inspired in him was his again. He wanted to prostrate himself before this face which looked out of another world into his. He would kill for it, live for it, die for it.

He dropped to his knees before this thing that was no longer a woman, and she bent over him. He looked into her blazing eyes as into windows that opened onto hell and wished with all his heart to leap through. He was powerless to close his mind to the current which flowed through it. Indeed, he had forgotten the Persecutors and all things save this face which flamed with light.

The tableau ended when the face went blank and the gross body of Lisa Roman toppled to the floor like a bag of wet cloth.

Dr. Earl came slowly out of his daze to find that she was dead.

Before he could close his mind to the Persecutors he felt the words: "The vessel was too small. The projector is the only—"

Rodney Earl shut his mind for the last time. Never, he knew, would he open it

again. His days might be few, but the day of the Persecutors should never come if he could prevent it.

Good or evil, he knew that they had no place in human affairs.

CRADUALLY strength came back to him, and awareness of the serious situation in which he found himself. Lisa Roman was dead, fortunately for her and perhaps for the world. The authorities might take a different view.

If he were convicted of her murder they would put him in a corrective hospital, where his life would be protected by every means possible. He would not be able to kill himself, and the longer he lived the greater chance the Persecutors would have of enslaving him to their wishes. His change in attitude here in the hospital might be an indication of their subtle effect on him.

He had gone to Philemon Abbot fully determined to die. But in the hospital he had decided on one more experiment. Had they worked on him by means unknown to him? Was their "Where have you been?" merely a ruse to make him believe that they didn't know?

He was shaken, true, as he looked down at the body of Lisa Roman. But was he affected as much as he should have been a week, a year ago? He shook his head. He didn't know, but he couldn't take a chance.

He went out to find Harvey Flood.

Later they stood above the body of Lisa Roman while Dr. Earl gave a professional, if mythical, account of the girl's death. Harvey Flood drew his straight brows into a frown as he listened. He heard his former instructor out, but the frown remained.

"You'll sign a certificate, sir, and report to the medical board at its next meeting?"

"Of course, my boy. I'll go home now and make out the report," Dr. Earl said casually.

He kept his face carefully blank, and avoided a direct look at young Flood lest his eyes betray his vast relief. He had counted on the young man taking it this way, allowing him to leave the institution. Once he was out, the affair was finished.

All that was necessary, he reflected, was to appear in public. The crowd which had clamored for his life before Phil Abbot's house indicated the intensity of feeling. As soon as he appeared on the street, word

would pass; citizens would gather, and he would be dead before the police heard of the matter.

He walked away from the hospital with a sensation of ironic amusement. He was walking to his own death, and he found cynical pleasure in the fact that he would die at the hands of the very persons whom he was trying to protect.

He headed for the university. News would spread quicker there. He touched his wrist watch and learned that a change of classes was due in two minutes. He quickened his pace.

Sight of the hurrying figure drew only casual glances from those he met, and he reflected wryly that his fame was not so great as he had thought. No recognition brightened the eyes that met his.

This was not true at the school. He was recognized, and presently accosted by young Jackson Peebles, who came running from one of the more remote buildings. He was a replica of his father in appearance, without the flabbiness of age. He towered over Dr. Earl, looming large against the circle of hard-eyed students who watched.

"All right, you little wart," Peebles demanded. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Dr. Earl chuckled. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Did you do that to Dad?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm going to beat you within an inch of your life."

"Don't stop there," Dr. Earl taunted.

Young Peebles stepped forward, small eyes slitted, fists cocked. "You sorcerer!"

A blood-red cloak fell out of the sky and curtained the scene from Dr. Earl. It had the appearance of a heavy rain, except for its color, and it fell around him like a shower curtain. It did not splash and wet him, but vanished into the lawn as it touched the grass.

Through the opaque wall Dr. Earl heard cries of many voices. These became fainter and the bloody rain stopped.

The students now stood at a respectful distance, Peebles among them, and surged back as Dr. Earl moved toward them.

"That wouldn't hurt you," Dr. Earl said. "Please. Get rocks or clubs. Finish it, all of you. Kill me, I beg you."

Their eyes whitened as he continued to approach. Then they broke suddenly and

fled, the girls among them screaming as if hands clawed them from behind, Dr. Earl was alone on the campus.

He raised his eyes to the open sky. "Damn you!" he whispered. "Damn you, I'll beat you yet!"

He went home.

CHAPTER V

"KILL HIM!"

"YOU will be protected," the Persecutors had told him. The truth of this was apparent. Was he destined to live on until his mind opened to them from sheer exhaustion—twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, with no sleep, ever?

How had they known? His mind had not opened. Had they operated through the mind of young Peebles, who had extra-sensory talents to some small degree? Or did they know now his every move, if not his thoughts?

He paced the floor, trying to devise a way to overcome their protective vigilance, until Julie Abbot arrived.

"Rod! I've looked all over for you for three days. Where in the devil have you been, and why didn't you let me know?"

"Didn't your brother tell you?"

"Tell me? He helped me search for you. I was about to start on the hospital when I heard you'd been on the campus. What's it all about, Rod?"

"Sit down, Julie. I want to talk."

He waited until she was seated, her long slim hands clasped, wide eyes full of bewildered concern.

"Remember what I told you in the restaurant the other night, Julie?"

"The only way I could forget it would be to shoot myself. What have you found out? What happened to poor Mr. Peebles? Where—"

He cut her off. "I'm going to tell you. Listen, Julie, you're fond of me?"

She smiled. "It's the talk of the town."

"I want you to understand a few things before I get down to the meat of the matter, Julie. First, I told Phil these things, and he slugged me, thinking I was mad, and lugged me off to the hospital to save me. There I underwent all the tests, and was certified to be in perfect mental health."

"You don't have to convince me, Rod," she broke in. "I know you're sane."

"Then keep it in mind, Julie. Whatever I say or ask, remember it."

"All right, get on with it."

Dr. Earl stood over her, a deadly serious expression in his dark eyes. "I've run up against something too big for me, Julie, and I'm about to crack. Maybe a few others wouldn't. There are many more tough-minded men and women than I. They could take it, maybe, but I can't. Not any longer."

"You seem all right," she said. "A little baggy under the eyes, but on the whole you look pretty good to me."

"Stop being flippant!" he stormed. "I'm serious."

Her eyes opened very wide. "Don't you understand anything about me, Rod? I have half a notion what's coming. Could I stand it if I didn't wisecrack?"

"I'm sorry, Julie. I'm upset. Me," he said dryly, "the big brain expert, upset. But I'm just a little man cursed with a certain amount of sensitivity. Well, anyway, here's the story."

He told her of the machine he had built, of the incident with Peebles, and recounted events up to date. As he told of Lisa Roman, Julie Abbot's hands clenched. She looked through his eyes into the hellish world behind those of Lisa Roman, and whitened around the mouth.

"From my point of view, at least," he said, "anything I can do to prevent them from breaking through to human minds is justifiable. What I am about to ask you to do, Julie, doesn't spring from purely altruistic motives. I'm no hero. The proposition is simply that I can't go on."

"Well, say it!" she snapped. "Stop beating around the bush."

"Wait. I want you to get the full picture. You see, I have been trained for a certain type of work, restricted by definite boundaries. I think it's fortunate that I haven't had time to train anybody else as fully as I am trained. Nobody else, except possibly one young man—the one who worked on your plane, I forget his name—is as qualified to learn of the existence of these things, whatever they are, and even he cannot control mental processes as I can."

"Does he know about 'em?"

"Not so far as I know."

"But I do, and Phil does. What about us?"

"Phil," Dr. Earl said, "has no extra-sensory perception, and yours is almost non-existent. I think—and this is pure conjecture—that neither of you would be a suitable medium for the Persecutors, and are therefore not dangerous."

"All right, Rod, what is it you want?"

"I want you to kill me, Julie."

SHE frowned at him, as if trying to understand. She didn't cry out; she made no dramatic gestures.

"You're not serious, Rod?"

"I am, definitely. I've tried to kill myself, and I couldn't. Young Peebles tried to beat me up, and was scared away. But I think that you and I together could manage it. I have closed my mind to them, and if you think of something else, perhaps they won't get wise until too late."

"And what if they do?"

"We'll have to work out some other means."

Julie Abbot got to her feet. She was breathing somewhat harder than usual, but otherwise her calm was normal.

"I won't do it, Rod."

"Why not, Julie?"

"Why not?" she exclaimed. "There are many reasons. I couldn't take another's life. I'm not conditioned to it. The day of such violence is done. Besides, if I could kill anyone, it wouldn't be you."

"Not even if the safety of the world depends on it?"

"How do you know it does? You admit you're only guessing."

"Yes, but I'm convinced."

"And who are you?" she went on. "You also admit you're no mental giant. What's your opinion worth? Let's leave it up to some board or other. Get a collective opinion."

"No!" he said sharply. "I'm trying to avoid that. The Persecutors want to become known to the world. That's what I'm trying to defeat."

She set her long jaw. "Then let's fight 'em. We can whip 'em."

LOOK, Julie," he said patiently, "I don't sleep any more. That would be wonderful if I didn't have to maintain a twenty-four mental vigilance every day. But I do. I can't rest. Some day I'll crack, and it won't be long. Then I'll be forced to build that damned machine again. I honestly don't know what would happen

then, but I feel certain that all our highest ideals would be shattered."

"I thought you were no hero," she said, almost with a sneer.

"Is it heroism, in a derogatory sense, to die rather than become a slave? Men have done it since the beginning of history. I tell you, you can't imagine the feeling I have toward whatever these beings are. I want to fall down and worship. And if they break me down much further, I shall. Julie, listen. I'm not going off half-cocked. This is my considered opinion, and I'm quite objective about it, all in all."

Her calm wavered. She crossed tense hands over her breast, and a touch of anguish came into her wide eyes.

"But why pick on me?" she wailed.

"Because you're the only person in the world I can trust, my dear."

"Well, I'm not going to do it," she said stubbornly. "If I should kill you, they'll just move on to somebody else. You can fight 'em, Rod. You're strong enough. We'll hide you. We'll go away somewhere."

He didn't answer. He looked at her, smiling a little.

Her shoulders slumped. "Yes, I suppose that's silly. You can't hide from something like that. Look, this is idiotic. I can't do it, and I won't. Let's talk about something else."

"Julie," Dr. Earl said quietly. "Do you love me, Julie?"

She twisted a smile. "And look where it's got me."

"I'm sorry, Julie, sorry for a lot of things. You know how I feel toward you. But there always seemed so much time. We both knew we'd get around to us one of these days. I'm sorry we waited—damned sorry. But if you love me, you'll do this for me, because that's part of love—doing things. If I were in your place I'd feel the same as you, but I'd do it. I swear I would. You must, Julie, because it means everything to me."

"More than me?" she asked bitterly.

"Not in the same way, Julie, but—yes, more than you."

She paced back and forth. "Romance," she muttered. "I got romance. When it finally comes, I'm supposed to kill it. What do you think I am, for heaven's sake, a superwoman?"

"Look at it this way, Julie. If you don't kill me, I'll either go stark raving mad when they break through again, or I'll be

a slave of theirs—not yours. Isn't this better than either of those conditions?"

She stopped and looked at him. "Yes, I suppose. Infinitesimal as it is, I've had my authentic taste of love. That's better than nothing, I guess."

"Then you'll do it?"

She came to him, buried her head on his shoulder. "Rod, Rod!"

"It won't be so hard, Julie. It'll be over quickly."

"Let's don't talk about it. Let's get it over with, before I weaken."

Dr. Earl took a dagger—a relic of the Steel Age—from his desk and handed it to her.

"We must succeed, Julie, and one of the factors of success is to keep your minds away from the actual task. I'll lie on the couch and we'll think of trivial things. I'll put my finger on the spot where you'll drive in the blade. Do it quickly when you do it."

She said nothing, but trailed across the room to a low couch, where he lay on his back and motioned her to sit beside him.

"Are you planning on a vacation this year?" he asked, pointing to the spot over his heart.

"Sure, sure," she gritted. "I'm planning on a vacation. What the bereft old maid will do this year. Let them model their conduct after mine. I'll show 'em how to be gay and carefree."

"Julie!"

"What do you expect?" she flared. "Am I to sing and dance, kick up my heels?"

He put his finger on his heart again, at the spot where the sliver of steel would slip through protecting ribs. "And have you bought new clothes?"

She set the point of the knife on the spot, gripped the hilt, tensed herself.

"Three bags full," she said. "All black."

THEN the knife fell from her hand, and she fell forward on his chest in a spasm of tears. "I can't do it! This is horrible."

With one hand he stroked her soft shoulder. With the other he retrieved the knife and put it in her hand again. He pushed her upright, placed the point of the knife once more.

"What—kind of—clothes are they, Julie?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Th—they're the—latest damned clothes I could f-f-ind."

He saw her eyes change. Through the

sheen of tears shone resolution, despair, and grief. But resolution was there, and she raised herself to drive the knife home with her weight.

"Good-by," she whispered fiercely. "Good—"

Suddenly a tongue of brilliance licked out of the air, flickering briefly over Juliet Abbot's head. With a deliberation that seemed endless to Dr. Earl, her eyes glazed, the knife dropped from her nerveless fingers, and she fell sideways toward the floor.

He grabbed her, held her in his arms. "Julie, Julie!"

"You'll need—a—new—stooge," she whispered.

"Julie! Come out of it! You'll live; you can't—"

She made an effort. She opened her eyes. She smiled.

Then the tongue of flame struck again, and she was dead. He continued to hold her. Tears came into his eyes, and a crooning into his throat. He rocked back and forth in his grief for a few seconds, then placed her gently on the couch.

He said nothing, standing above her with clenched hands. He rolled his dark eyes briefly upward and they blazed, but he did not shout the imprecations which were in his heart. What was the use? What was the use of anything now?

"Julie," he whispered.

He went bitterly out of the house, unseeing eyes fixed straight ahead. He was not aware of the crowd until it was upon him, and he was hailed.

"Hey, you!"

HIS eyes came into focus, took in the group of fifty set faces, fifty tense figures massed ahead of him. In the van was young Peebles, who walked with a stranger to meet him. This was a stocky man with a lined, square face.

"I'm Gerald Roman," he said. "Lisa Roman's father. Does that mean anything to you?"

Dr. Earl tried to speak. He tried to bring into mental perspective the scene in the hospital room. But all he could think of was "Julie, Julie." He said nothing.

"She was empty," Gerald Roman said. "She didn't have a mind, but she was my daughter. They gave me a story about natural death, but somebody else saw her go into that room with you. I don't know

what you did to her. I don't want to know. But she was human, which is more than we can say of you. We think you've been around here long enough, Dr. Earl!"

Mutters of agreement ran through the crowd. For a brief instant Dr. Earl recognized many of his students in the group. His thoughts flicked at these, but came back to the keening of his heart.

Julie, he thought. Julie.

"And you should see my dad," young Peebles cut in. "He was a great man. Now he sits around and stares at anything bright. You're an evil old man, Dr. Earl."

Dr. Earl said nothing. He was hardly conscious of the accusations. They barely registered on his mind, as did the figure which moved out of the crowd and joined Roman and Peebles. This was one of the young men who had acted as his bodyguard in those days when he built the machine.

"I'll try again," he said to Peebles. "We're doing something that's nearly five hundred years dead, taking the law into our own hands. It isn't civilized; it isn't fair. He should stand trial."

"The worst he'd get," Peebles snapped, "would be incarceration in a comfortable room. It isn't bad enough. Did you see my father?"

"I saw him," the young man said. "I was there. After all, we don't know how it happened. I believe there's a natural explanation, and I think Dr. Earl ought to have a chance to make it."

"All right. Have you got to say for yourself, old man?"

Dr. Earl stared at them. "Tell Phil Abbot," he said, "they got Julie. I'm sorry."

Even Dr. Earl's ex-bodyguard gasped at this. Another mutter ran through the crowd, a deeper and fiercer murmur. But the young man stuck to his original position.

"They? They? Tell us, sir, for your own sake, what you're talking about. These people are reviving superstition. Tell them. Give an explanation. My God, you're in a jam!"

Dr. Earl curled his mouth. He said nothing.

Gerald Roman pulled a blaster from under his tunic and pointed it at the little man. "You won't bewitch the life or mind from anyone else," he said grimly.

The same tongue of brilliance that had

struck Juliet Abbot dead now flicked the gun from Gerald Roman's hand. He looked at this hand, which had an angry color. He clapped it to him, groaning.

DR. EARL brought his thoughts to the situation. They were afraid, these people who sought his life. They were afraid of what he might do. They thought he was a witch doctor, using black and evil powers. Another manifestation and they might break and run.

He broke a vow then, a vow which he had kept meticulously. He had sworn, while training at Genetics Research, never to use his mental powers for personal gain.

He broke the vow.

He projected a thought pattern at the crowd.

Kill him! his thoughts ran. Stamp him out like a spider. He's unclean, unholy. Kill him! It's in self-defense, for he may strike at you next. Save your lives! Take his! For the sake of your children, your families, yourselves, kill him; kill him; kill him!

His thoughts took effect, slowly on some, instantly on others. The crowd as a whole surged forward.

This forward rush was checked as bright tongues of color licked at the front ranks, but after staggering back for a second they rolled forward in an angry impetuous wave.

"Kill him!" cried a few.

Kill him! echoed Dr. Earl's thoughts.

The crowd was blotted from sight by a curtain of falling rock. Dr. Earl's heart sank, thinking he was saved. Above the thunder of small rocks that beat at his feet he could hear the enraged yells.

Then a man broke through, bleeding and bruised about the head. He rushed at

Dr. Earl, but fell, apparently dead, as tongues of flame lashed him.

Kill him! Dr. Earl cried in his mind.

Another broke through, and another. The fall of rocks ceased, and the larger of these became weapons. Men scrambled for them, and hurled them at the little man who threw back his head with exultant laughter.

"I'll beat you yet!" he cried at the Persecutors, and his cry was fresh fuel on the fire of the mob's anger.

They rushed in one concerted mass, checked as the flames licked at them. A few more fell, among them Dr. Earl's former students. He exulted afresh; the Persecutors were destroying possible channels of communication. The crowd was only checked, however. They pressed forward through the flames, and Dr. Earl sprang to meet them with laughter bubbling out of his throat.

He was not conscious for long, for they beat him down with their fists and stamped the life out of his small frame. The expression of triumph did not fade; it lingered even after he was dead.

The mob looked shamefully at the dead who lay in the street. Then they blustered, talked overloudly of necessity, and presently went away.

NELSON LAINE'S eyes opened in the darkness. Out of that darkness, out of somewhere, the summons was coming again. He quivered with fear of the unknown.

He remembered, with a twinge of sympathy, the little doctor who had died six months before after running amok and killing more than a dozen men bigger than he. Doctor Earl had said the phenomena which labeled him as a trafficker in black magic had come from outside.

Nelson Laine remembered his scoffing.

An opalescent globe appeared against his ceiling. He watched in fascination, unable to tear his eyes away. He strove with every ounce of will to shut his eyes, and finally succeeded—but not before words seemed to come to him.

"Nelson Laine, Nelson Laine!"

He jumped out of bed, dressed in an agony of haste, and rushed out.

He knew one thing: he'd better see a psychiatrist, or one of these days he'd go completely off his rocker.

THE END

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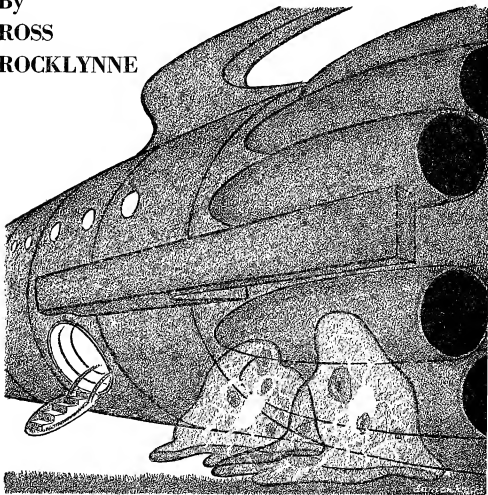
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CHAPTER I

STOWAWAYS FROM THE STARS

THE interstellar ship *Clarion* landed on New York Field with all the usual fanfare. The brass bands came strutting out; high officials greeted the important arrivals; flowers were thrown; the crowds

waved and yelled and stamped madly and kissed and hugged, and did all those things which crowds do to people who have been separated from the home planet.

There were two passengers of the splendid ship, however, who were accorded no notice whatever—which is as the two passengers wanted it to be. By a sort of mitosis, the same mitosis that allows blood

cells to melt through the walls of a blood vein, these two strange passengers melted through the hull of the ship under the mighty bank of rocket jets, and lay in protoplasmic masses under the shadow of the hull, contemplating in some bewilderment the antics of these new human beings.

Isn't this something? telepathically enthused the larger of the two stowaways. *Who'd have ever expected that planets other than Klutz were inhabited? How come we never thought to build a spaceship ourselves?*

There's more to building a spaceship than thinking about it. You have to have something that these creatures call tools. And, just as important, what is known as technical skill and knowledge. Even then it isn't a snip. Behind the building of spaceships lie centuries upon centuries of improvements in the methods of food-hunting. We don't need tools to advance our methods of food-hunting. We already possess the most perfect method—we eat whatever we happen to contact. So no progress in food-hunting means no tools, which means no spaceships, which means we stay on Klutz until by the sheerest accident a spaceship from another planet lands for fresh water and we mitose through the hull and ride away with it. I am sort of worried about how we're going to get back, though.

Why worry about it? said the other, lightly. *It strikes me that with our peculiar abilities we might have a rousing good time if we go about it in the right way. For instance, do you realize that among human beings ownership of some thing or object or symbol is the supreme guarantor of enjoyment? Why couldn't we try and own something?*

Don't forget, the other reminded, that to own something you have to render a service.

We'll render a service, then.

To do that we'll have to become human beings.

We'll become human beings then.

The smaller of the beings hesitated. *No-no, he decided at last. Not right away. Let's take a look around first.* He created a pseudopod and pointed toward the fringe of the crowd, which was now melting away. *A half-dozen crows were tearing into a bag of crackers that someone had dropped. Let's become birds for a while.*

Then maybe we'll see something we want to own.

The larger being agreed, and they set their minds to it. Be it understood that this was no easy job. It required a degree of concentration that would have been beyond the scope of a human being. Indeed, if a human being had been able to summon that degree of concentration he too could have performed similar feats.

The transformation took about fifteen minutes. Feathers appeared; black pigment appeared; wings and beak appeared. The two beings—the larger of whom called himself Karjaljaraba, and the smaller Oo—then flapped away.

They were crows. As such they had sacrificed one of their abilities, which was to pick up the thoughts of beings other than themselves. However, they could converse between themselves.

It is to be noted that the beings of the planet Klutz had single-track minds. They were intelligent, yes; extremely so. But in picking up the thoughts of human beings on the interstellar ship *Clarion* they were often confused by the variety of shade and coloring of certain thought pictures. They had no referents which would enable them to decide with exactness the meaning of those thought-pictures. Thus, an abstraction in the mind of a human being might often seem to these creatures to be a reality. Thus it was with the Statue of Liberty. They decided they had found liberty itself, which had such charming connotations in the minds of the human beings.

Having found that liberty was uppermost in the minds of human beings, that is, the two creatures pursued the idea mercilessly downward, and believed that there was some tangible thing which each human being owned.

The Statue of Liberty was it.

The two crows were excited as they circled it. "We'll have a great deal of fun now," Oo cawed in crow-language. "If we can gain for ourselves something which originally belonged to the whole human race, we'll really own something valuable. But in order to own it, we'll have to render a service. That implies that we must become human beings."

Karjaljaraba swooped down, a tattered bundle of ebon, and came to a preening stop on the torch the lady was holding in

her upraised hand. He gazed with an entranced eye at the Staten Island ferry, which from this distance and height was toy-size. Oo landed beside him, as usual busy with laying plans for both.

"But not just two human beings," he amended. "Two *important* human beings. Where, Karjaljaraba, would you say that two important human beings would be residing?"

Karjaljaraba referred back to his recently-acquired knowledge of human affairs. "In a top-floor corner suite of the largest hotel in town?" he hazarded.

Oo beamed. "What I was thinking exactly. At least we can make a stab at it. Come on!"

In the fourth such suite which they inspected, on the top floor of the most palatial hotel in New York, they found twice as much as they expected. Briefly, they found Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, who was Harry's gray-headed secretary and general companion. Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, to the excited satisfaction of Oo and Karjaljaraba, had been on the *Clarion* at the same time as the two creatures from the planet Klutz.

Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler, as far as could be gathered, were both scientists, and bore the title of doctor. Both specialized in the science of nematodology—which is to say, the study of round worms.

Oo had studied the younger man, Robertson, with a certain degree of interest during the trip. Robertson's mind had been a peculiar jumble of two thoughts—worms and love. It had been only after a great deal of cogitation that Oo was able to decide that *worms* were real and *love* an abstraction. The first dealt with the third planet of the sun Betelgeuse, which planet Robertson owned, and on which planet a certain species of round worm constituted almost the sole animal life. The second dealt with a girl whose name was Mary Lou Evans. Mary Lou Evans and Harry Robertson were, to use the idiom, in love.

The most important facet of Harry Robertson however, was that he was truly famous, and of great interest to the world in general and to the medical profession in particular. That was why he occupied the top-floor corner suite of the Hotel Arizona. The TMA—the Terrestrial Medi-

cal Association—had provided quarters for him there. Harry Robertson had been on his worm-infested planet for the last two years. Having discovered a serum which the worms secreted that would cure several heretofore incurable diseases at one fell blow, Harry Robertson had made medical history. He had rendered to humanity a service beyond computation.

Oo and Karjaljaraba stood on the windowsill thirty-seven floors above the canyon of the city, looking through the screen at Harry. Harry was walking back and forth, occasionally pounding one hand into the palm of the other with resounding smacks. As he did this he talked. His blue eyes snapped with pride; occasionally he reached up and flung back the black cowlick which fell over his bronzed forehead.

What he was talking about Oo and Karjaljaraba did not know, for they had no knowledge of the English language. The sole audience of his harangue was Angus Pandler, who sat with his thin legs crossed, his crinkled, fading eyes attentive on Harry's gestures and words. Now and then Angus nodded, as if satisfied with what Harry was saying. Once or twice he burst into a wide grin, as if Harry had said something funny.

Oo looked doubtful. "If I become Harry Robertson, I wonder whether I can be humorous enough to carry out the deception."

"That all depends. If Harry Robertson's humor is involuntary, you'll have command of it just as you'll have command of all the other involuntary functions—speech, mannerisms, breathing, heartbeat, and so forth. I think, however, that Robertson's humor here is forced. He seems to be rehearsing for something. This may mean we'll be placed in a delicate situation, incidentally. Since you're better at handling such things, you take over Robertson, the important member of the duo. I'll take Angus Pandler."

Oo agreed. They then went inside. Which is to say, they mitosed through the window and on to the floor of the suite, after going back to their original protoplasmic form. Immediately they set in motion those processes which would allow them to duplicate the bodies. Each secured a good mental picture, then flowed under a closet door and proceeded to con-

centrate, drawing matter from the air, since each was smaller in volume than either of the two human beings.

Thirty minutes later, Harry Robertson, duplicated inwardly to the tiniest capillary and outwardly to the shiny tuxedo which sat so awkwardly on his frame, moved from the closet, followed by the duplicated Angus Pandler. They moved across thick rugs, into the capacious study where the two human beings were engaged in spirited discussion. Angus was leaning back, his feet on the table. Harry Robertson was facing him, his back to the duplicates. Oo gathered from the content of their speech, which he could now understand, that they were discussing a man named John Huggins Randolph. The two men had never met John Huggins Randolph, but they had had various unpleasant long-distance contacts with him. Randolph owned the Trans-universal Drug Company.

Angus saw the duplicates first. His mouth stopped as if a guillotine had chopped off his voice. He gulped and went slowly white.

Karjaljaraba said in a matter-of-fact voice, "You are no longer in possession of your normal faculties. Sleep."

Muscles in Angus' jaw moved as if he were in a paroxysm. He was evidently trying to come erect. All his muscles gave way at once and he sank back against his chair. His eyes closed.

Harry Robertson whirled, and for one confounded instant met his double's eyes. Oo spoke slowly and distinctly. Harry Robertson collapsed like a piece of string, and Oo jumped forward just in time to keep his head from striking the table. He lifted Robertson into his arms and took him to the closet. Karjaljaraba followed, bearing Angus Pandler. They placed the two men side by side against the wall in a sitting position and quietly closed the door.

Oo stood listening. The heavy breathing of the duplicated men was extremely audible.

"We'll have to take a chance on nobody coming in until we've managed to render the service which will get us the Statue of Liberty," said Oo, speaking in the English language for practice. "Meanwhile, we can examine Robertson's papers. They may help us."

KARJALJABARA found Robertson's briefcase on the table, full of legal documents. Oo went through them, glancing over the contents. When he found the title deed for Robertson's wormy planet—"said planet being in numerical order third from that star designated by the Interstellar Board as Betelgeuse, being at aphelion seven hundred forty-seven million (747,000,000) miles from said star, and at perihelion four hundred two million (402,000,000) miles from said star, having diurnal rotation of fourteen hours, ten minutes, ten seconds at present time and date as stamped on this Title Deed in proper place, having period of revolution around aforementioned star Betelgeuse equal to seven and eight-tenths (7.8) Terrestrial years, or two and one-tenth (2.1) Nargan years, said planet Narga being first in order from aforementioned star Betelgeuse—" Oo allowed his lips to stretch in a natural grin of delight.

"This may be exactly what we want for our purpose," he said warmly. "This is the planet whose worms Robertson has been using to render a highly useful service to humanity. Technically and officially, I now own the planet. Perhaps we will find some opportunity to trade the planet for liberty."

Karjaljaraba—Angus Pandler—rubbed worriedly at his grizzled jaw. "And perhaps Harry Robertson will not like that. Bear in mind, Oo, that we're out to have some fun, not to make other people unhappy. Robertson may have some special plans for this planet which we can't perceive."

"Nonsense!" Oo stuck the title deed into his coat pocket. "Whoever has the worms will render the same service as Robertson. You know yourself that a human scientist is a person who is thoroughly selfless, who thinks only in terms of humanity as a whole, who does not care for credit and glory, but just wants to work. It was all in that book we found the old lady reading."

He turned back to the papers, but at that moment a soft buzzer rang insistently. Robertson-Oo started toward the door, a quite involuntary action. He thought better of it, and waved Karjaljaraba toward the door instead. From the look on Karjaljaraba's face, he did not relish the job. It was almost funny to Oo the way Karjaljaraba shuffled off, painfully trying

to make sure that he wouldn't do anything not in character with Angus Pandler.

He needn't have worried. Oo heard a feminine shriek of joy.

"Angus! Angus, it's so good to see you!" Pause, *smack*. "You haven't changed a bit. I just got here—I dropped my purse—oh, thanks, Angus—from San Francisco. They had the most awful crowds—I had to use tenth-level traffic lanes all the way. I'm *breathless*, Harry! Harry!"

There was the sound of running, clicking feet, and a human girl came into view from around the ell of the hall. She was dressed startlingly in blue and red. She had a round face and full lips, and she was slight of figure. Her eyes were blue and they shone.

"Harry!" she shrieked. "Oh, my darling!"

Oo was stupefied until she flung herself into his arms, crying and laughing and babbling at the same time. Then his reactions became normal and he kissed her, anywhere on her face that his lips might happen to land. He held her tightly, realizing at last what Robertson's thoughts had dealt with when on the subject of love.

"My own," he whispered huskily. "My wonderful one! I've missed you—it's been plain torment—"

She flung her head back. "What do you think it's been for me?" she said fiercely. "Just thinking of you out there, all alone except for Angus and the Nargans and some—some worms! Oh, Harry!" She kissed him again. Then she stood back and ran her eyes critically up and down his six feet. She flung herself into his arms again, kissing him passionately. "I love you, you great big foolish dolt, for going away and leaving me. Now we're going to get married—" She stopped to look at her fingerwatch. She gave a shriek of alarm.

"Your speech!" she wailed. "In half an hour— Come on, I rented a ground-car. I'm going with you—"

"My speech?" said Oo vaguely.

"Oh, Harry! You haven't changed a bit! They're waiting for you right now. Aren't you excited that all the big names in the profession are just sitting there, waiting for you—just *you*? Aren't you excited?"

She scampered toward the door, holding Oo's hand so that he had to run. He cast a look at Karjaljaraba. Karjaljaraba's telepathed thoughts came: *You'll have to go through with it. You have to make a speech—probably about Robertson's worms. This is a delicate situation, Oo, remember.*

Delicate! Oo's thoughts gasped as Mary Lou Adams dragged him onto the elevator. *Find some way out! I don't know anything about the worms! You know I don't. Karjaljaraba, this is not to my liking. It comes too suddenly. If I had time to prepare—if I could have found Robertson's notes—this is what he was rehearsing for.*

The elevator grounded, and whatever Karjaljaraba might have said in answer was lost to Oo as his fiancée guided him through homebound crowds of pedestrians. She shoved him inside a low gravitomobile, laughingly pulled Karjaljaraba in beside her, then turned and planted another kiss on Oo.

"Oh, my darling, I love you! I'm so proud of you, you hermit—but your tie's all wrong. There! Aren't you excited? Is your speech all ready? I'll bet it's a grand speech. Oh, darling, you could tell them *anything* and they'd be tickled to death. You're a great man, darling!"

Oo, for the first time in all his life, was petrified. This was certainly not the easiest way to get liberty, he would have sworn. He saw nothing wrong with speaking to a hundred or a hundred thousand people; he knew nothing of stagefright. But to present an oral essay on worms—and a particular kind of worm about whose habitat, innards or other characteristics he knew nothing—well, that was beyond reason.

We might, came Karjaljaraba's incisive thoughts, *do a fade-out.*

No! The idea horrified Oo. *And leave this pretty young thing in the lurch? Remember, I'm in love with her—or rather, my body and my instincts and thalamus are in love with her. Think what that might do to a real Harry Robertson. No man is so great that he can snub his inferiors. No—no, I'll have to go through with it. I confess, however, that I see no way out at present. Now be quiet—let me think.*

CHAPTER II

PLANET FOR SALE!

KARJALJARABA was quiet, but Mary Lou was not. When they arrived at the auditorium his brain was numb and quite empty. He followed Mary Lou through a rear entrance.

He vaguely remembered somebody rushing up and grabbing his hand as he was led into the wings of the auditorium, behind which he heard a hum of voices such as might come from a thousand men and women.

He turned to look at Mary Lou, and she kissed him warmly.

"I'll be in the audience, darling," she promised. "I won't understand a *thing* you're saying—those things you wrote me in your letters about the worms. I couldn't understand a *thing*! But, darling, make it good—" and she was gone, and there was nobody there but Karjaljaraba and a man who was fat and beaming and had introduced himself as Gregoryev Donskoy of Moscow. He spoke perfect English.

"You have your notes? No?" His eyes shot up. "You will speak from memory? Wonderful!"

"I may," said Oo, feeling as if he were rooted to the spot, "be a bit technical."

Doctor Gregoryev Donskoy was effusive in his declarations that Oo could be as technical as he wished. He raised his hand sharply and beckoned Oo and Karjaljaraba and they stepped into the bright glare of the footlights. Oo and Karjaljaraba carefully sat down while Donskoy went to the rostrum and waited for attention. Donskoy went into a long, rambling account of Dr. Harry Robertson's voluntary exile on his planet; Oo caught phrases—"cancer—serum extracted by a method heretofore unused—tuberculosis—pernicious anemia—benefactor of mankind—the sulphas, quinine, gramicidin—"

What shall we do? came Karjaljaraba's clear, cold thoughts. You have not yet thought of a solution?

No.

This, moaned Karjaljaraba, is the blackest moment of my life. I shudder to think of what agonies you must be going through. I cannot help you. We must prepare for a hasty retreat.

"And this man of whom I speak, this man who knows nematodes—worms—

better than any man has ever been permitted to know them, this man I now present—in the flesh! Dr. Harry Robertson!"

Dr. Donskoy melted away from the rostrum, and Oo got up and seemed to be wafted toward the rostrum on the solid deluge of applause which now was hurled at him by the hundreds of scientists sitting out there and looking up at him. He stood at the rostrum and thought with a cool clarity, "Perhaps we should have chosen some hotel other than the Arizona."

He also reflected that perhaps he and Karjaljaraba should have quietly faded away as Karjaljaraba had suggested.

"Ladies—gentlemen—fellow nematologists and members of the medical profession," said Oo. "Thank you."

He paused. To Karjaljaraba he urgently telepathed, *Prepare for a hasty retreat. We will simply mitose through the—Wait! I have it!*

He had it indeed! The clue came from a remembrance of what Mary Lou had said in the gravitobile—she wouldn't understand anything he said. Well, *well!*

Oo began to talk. He talked with clarity, devoting the first half minute of his speech to a pseudo-description of the wormy jungles of his planet. "I felt like a worm myself at times." Gently indulgent laughter. "I dissected worms by day and by night, always with the good of humanity in mind. When I discovered that I had isolated a serum which was even more potent than the sulphas, quinine, gramicidin—when I discovered that the neces of the tenebes sacs were rampant with that milk-colored liquid which some have referred to as the phosalfluid—my joy knew no bounds. Henceforth I knew that my every waking moment was to be devoted to this new salace. The salace, you understand, was nothing as simple as the pery—or the auctorransin, for that matter. But it was *new*. I felt quite justified in my assumptions."

Oo paused to drink some water.

"Now." He levelled a forefinger at his tense audience. "My equipment was new. The Nargans helped with that. My retorts were of special tanus resistant lubroid. This was important. Tanus, it should be understood, is a caroid of the tomer

family. The lubroid, upon receiving a normal amount of *plenum arbitrum*, remained as transparent as my experiments demanded. The next step was one which you all begin to perceive. Briefly, it was the matter of separating the phosol from its nemodic tensors. When this came to a boil, I removed by the vacuum process described, I believe, in some of the better textbooks. Now, hemodically, I should have succeeded. But, unfortunately, there was no hemosis. My first attempt at inciliation was a complete failure. In addition there was the complication caused by the neces of the nemod strontifying collexisely. I decided to resort to insurbation.

"Let me review insurbation, ladies and gentlemen. It's hardly as complex a process as you imagine. In this instance I made use of the rotary tables occasionally used with a flaccis in view. Fortunately I had plenty of worms. And water, too. I couldn't forget the water. So much for that."

Oo rubbed his hands, drank some more water, and ran his eyes over the rows and rows of fascinated staring doctors and nematodologists. He could just make out Mary Lou Evans, sitting perfectly motionless and worshipping him in a back seat. The audience was supremely attentive.

Oo gained confidence, walking back and forth and pounding his fist into his palm occasionally. "Now I launched into the second phase of my attack on this stubborn subject. Having incised the remainder of my lascient streams, I now began the enchorian diagnosis of the hemus veins, throwing in liberal quantities of cephalstain antibodies and extorting from ten to twenty millimeters of faciosic acid—always on the lookout for strontifying confluences, naturally. My instruments, being of the finest precision, began to record ten, thirty, fifty liters. I called in my assistants to take care of that end of it, and, fortunately, no accident occurred. I was now nearing my goal and the liquid was assuming that purplish tint usually desired. Extorting again, I built up the doublets with a ten per cent solution of tebanium, streamed, flexed, incised, exposit and economically reverted to the generally misnamed corious fly-stone—a colorless sporada which occasionally—and sometimes to my discomfort—relisces audines or paracoids. In the meantime I

had plenty of worms. Now, before we proceed further, are there any questions?"

Oo could have cut his tongue out when a small, nervous little man stood up in the front row. He cleared his throat. "You make use of the word exposit—and there are several other—"

"Did I say *exposit*?" said Oo in surprise. "You're sure of that?"

"Well—" said the little man, a trifle defiantly.

Oo was firm. "I did not, certainly, use the word you mentioned. I doubt if there is such a word. However, you were probably confusing the relaxus of terbarin with the nematode, or its equivalent, which occurs on the borderline—they generally run very high. I trust you understand, sir?"

The little man sat down. He said slowly, "I see."

Oo went on. He went on for an hour and seven minutes, the words tumbling out of his mouth with complete fervor, his expression sincere, his every gesture. He stepped down from the rostrum with a bow. There was a dead silence.

Oo walked away from the rostrum, waiting for the guillotine to fall. Then somebody started clapping. It might have been Mary Lou. Somebody else joined in. The auditorium rocked, and Dr. Gregoryev Donskoy held up his pudgy hands and with a slightly dazed expression muttered platitudes about the great works such men as Dr. Harry Robertson were performing in scattered corners of the universe, working with tools and materials "which some of us can hardly pretend to understand."

When Donskoy turned around, Oo grabbed his hand, shook it, blurted out something highly unintelligible and turned, almost stumbling over Karjaljaraba. The two of them rushed toward the back entrance of the auditorium and debouched into an alley. Oo leaned against the wall, dead white.

Karjaljaraba looked at him in awe. "Where," he said, "did you learn about worms?"

"Never mind," Oo gasped. "Let's get back to the hotel."

"What about Mary Lou?"

"I couldn't face her," said Oo, looking sick. They started toward the main street when a portly man, swinging his cane, came rushing toward them. He grabbed Oo's hand.

"Dr. Robertson? What incredible luck! I surely thought I'd missed you. I don't profess to have understood your extremely technical speech—we'll leave that to the great brains." He chuckled, then instantly became sober. "Permit me to introduce myself. John Huggins Randolph, and mightily pleased to make your acquaintance. Robertson," said Randolph, drawing himself erect, "Trans-universal Drugs is prepared to buy your planet!"

Oo looked dazed. "Buy my planet?"

Karjaljaraba hurriedly telephated, *The word "buy," as I understand it, Oo, is a verb which implies a transaction wherein a reality is exchanged for a symbol. However, the symbol, if one watches oneself, generally has a value equal, referent to the vendor, to the reality exchanged. Randolph states he is prepared to offer you such a symbol in exchange for the planet. It may well be, if we work it right, that the symbol will be valuable enough to exchange for liberty. This is the same Randolph the two humans were talking about, by the way.*

I see, Oo telephated back. He got himself in hand, to Randolph said cautiously, "I see. And how much of the symbol were you prepared to offer?"

Randolph looked confused. "The symbol?" Then he grinned broadly, burst into a single high-pitched chuckle. "The beans—the gravy—the iron men—the greenbacks—the almighty dollar. And they said you were a green kid!" Then he became businesslike and shot out, "A hundred thousand?"

Oo hesitated, his brow wrinkling.

"Five hundred thousand," Randolph amended quickly. There was a slightly stunned, amazed expression in his eyes.

Oo's hand nervously crept up toward his tie. "Would that be enough to buy liberty?" he asked cautiously. "You see, I have no desire to be unfair, but it is imperative that we have liberty."

Randolph's jowls went slack. "You mean—" he suddenly drew Oo back into the shadows—"you mean—" incredulously—"the bluecoats are on your trail? I'll be damned! Listen, I'll mention my top price—one million, five hundred thou-

sand. Man, that'll buy you all the liberty you want. You could get by with murder on that. How about it?"

Oo telephated, *This seems like a fair offer, Karjaljaraba. What do you think? He tells us that we can buy liberty with his symbol.*

Karjaljaraba was exultant. *Excellent! Go ahead.*

Oo nodded his head warmly, "It's a go. I've got the deed in my pocket."

Randolph's breath came fast. He seemed to stagger slightly. He gulped. Then, without another word, he grabbed Oo's arm, and rushed towards the street intersection. He hailed a gravitomobile, pushed Oo and Karjaljaraba in. In ten minutes he was ushering them into an office in a downtown business section. Randolph sat them down, and in another second was at the visiphone. He made a half-dozen calls, and then turned to Oo, sweating.

"My lawyers will be here shortly," he explained. He looked at Oo in fascination, and then began to walk excitedly up and down the office, rubbing his hands together. He seemed to be exultant about something which Oo could not understand. . . .

In the next hour Oo signed Dr. Harry Robertson's name to innumerable papers. A new deed was drafted, and Randolph made out a check for the required amount. Oo looked at it stupidly, trying to think things out to the best advantage.

"We want to make a certain exchange tonight," he began haltingly. "This check—"

Randolph looked stunned. "You want cash? Good God! You fellows must be hip-deep in— All right!" He conferred with his lawyers, who left hurriedly. Half an hour later they came back just as hurriedly, carrying a satchel filled to overflowing with bundles of green paper with figures printed on them. Randolph counted the money interminably, then thrust the satchel into Oo's hand.

"Fair enough?" he asked quickly. "Fine! Thank you, gentlemen—thank you!"

He showed them to the door, closed it in their faces.

They did not see him collapse into a chair. Randolph had just bought a treasure house for a fraction of its value.

CHAPTER III

"NEVER TRUST A HUMAN!"

NEW YORK is New York, no matter what the century. Thus it was not long before Karjaljaraba and Oo, strolling down Broadway, found a man who was willing to sell them the Statue of Liberty. This was the fifth man they had asked. The four others had not even answered Oo's polite question, but mumbled something and sidled away. The fifth had been a small fat man who leaned against a telephone pole and picked his teeth, studying passers-by with some interest. His sophistication dropped away when Oo apologetically approached him with his question, for he turned a slight green.

After a moment he gulped, "So you want to buy the Lady? Now ain't that a coincidence! I own the Lady!" His fingers trembled a little when Oo opened his satchel. He grabbed the satchel. "How much you got there?" he queried hoarsely.

When Oo told him, he appeared about to faint. The net result of this was that the Statue of Liberty, by an amazing coincidence being on sale for a million and a half exactly, became the property of the two beings from the planet Klutz. The papers were made out properly in a little room with fly-specked wallpaper, the fat little man pecking out the necessary clauses on a little typewriter.

He signed the papers, and Oo signed the papers, and the fat little man took the satchel and shook their hands and showed them out the door, and the deal was completed.

Oo and Karjaljaraba strode along with their chests out. They felt that they had accomplished a great deal on this day. They now owned liberty, lock, stock and barrel. People would doubtless be surprised when they found out about it.

WHAT they were going to do with liberty they did not know. However, by now it was midnight, and the duplicated bodies they had acquired showed definite signs of fatigue. They caught a gravitobile and went back to the Hotel Arizona and went on up to their rooms. Here a singular thing occurred. As they turned the light on they saw Mary Lou Evans standing in the middle of the floor,

her hair in disarray, her cheeks streaked with tears, and a thermospray in her hand.

Sprawled on the floor near her feet were the real Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler. They were breathing heavily, still in the hypnotic state.

"Now," said Mary Lou Evans, while she fought to control her voice against horror, "suppose you two imposters explain what's going on before I boil your blood in your veins. If you don't explain, and if it isn't sensible, I'll go stark, raving mad! I wondered why you didn't wait for me at the auditorium. I wondered why you acted so strange. You hardly knew me! You had the nerve to kiss me. Why—why, you—" She choked. "What did you do to Harry?"

Karjaljaraba telepathed, *This is a dangerous situation. We are not so super-human that we can stand the heat rays that gun will throw out. We will die as surely as any human being if she pulls the trigger. I suggest that we make a clean breast of the whole affair, and convince her that our intentions are completely well-meaning. If she is resentful of our having sold the planet we will have to turn ownership of the Statue of Liberty over to Harry. That should satisfy her.*

Oo agreed with this line of reasoning. He, as well as Karjaljaraba, knew the dangers involved in hypnotizing the girl. Her muscles would contract and the thermospray would go off. Besides, there was no point in hypnosis. They would make the explanation anyhow, sooner or later. They had no desire to inconvenience others.

"I beg you," said Oo diffidently, his eyes nervously on the gun, "to give us complete opportunity to explain before you—ah—decide on strong measures."

"Explain!" Mary Lou shrieked. "How can you explain? There isn't any explanation, unless you are devils or monsters—or unless I'm crazy. It couldn't happen. I dare you to explain!"

"We are monsters," Oo agreed hurriedly. "At least, what you would call monsters. But we have no evil intentions. We are really overgrown amoebae, I guess. We possess the peculiar ability to duplicate any living thing." He explained their origin, their experiences as crows. "Our main purpose was to gain ownership of the Statue of Liberty," Oo went on. "Now that we have it—"

Mary Lou's lips worked. "So you own

the Statue of Liberty. How did you accomplish that insanity?"

"We gave a million and a half dollars for it," said Oo, feeling that he was getting some place.

"And where did you get a million and a half dollars?"

"A man by the name of John Huggins Randolph—"

Mary Lou said in deadly tone, "Don't tell me. Let me guess. You sold Harry's planet to Trans-universal Drugs. Is that it?"

"Well, yes. And in exchange—"

"You bought the Statue of Liberty!" The thermospray dropped from Mary Lou's fingers. She doubled up on the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

Hysteria, telepathed Karjaljaraba. *Though why she should be hysterical I cannot begin to understand. But it is an obvious fact that she does not believe the Statue of Liberty to be of value equal to her lover's planet.*

Oo stood in some indecision. Hysteria was a species of shock, he guessed; a shock should bring her out. He stooped over Mary Lou and slapped her. She stopped laughing. Her hand crept up to her cheek in dazed fashion. She began to weep large, rapid tears, her shoulders heaving.

"You poor, senseless idiots," she choked. "You don't know what you've done. You're the greenest of the green. It's laughable, downright laughable. Trans-universal Drugs is a slimy monopolizing concern. They've got the planet and the worms and they can find the process in any one of half a dozen technical magazines. A serum that should have been sold to humanity at slightly more than cost will now be sold at a thousand per cent profit."

She came to her feet. "Well, don't stand there," she said tearfully. "Unhypnotize Harry and Angus. I'll try to keep them from killing you."

Oo's human skin turned pale. He telepathed to Karjaljaraba, *We'll make a break for it. We must have committed some unbelievable stupidity. I don't choose to remain in here and be subjected to the insults of Harry and Angus when they awaken. So the minute they begin to stir and Mary Lou turns her attention from us we will quietly walk through the door.*

We might as well retain our human bodies for the time.

Karjaljaraba telepathed his assent. He stood nervously by while Oo commanded Angus and Harry to awaken. The two humans opened their eyes instantly, and Mary Lou, weeping, dropped to her knees beside Harry. By that time Oo and Karjaljaraba were outside the suite and running. They caught an elevator, left the hotel, and literally threw themselves into a gravitomobile.

"Anywhere!" Oo tensely told the driver.

The gravitomobile, which moved by falling downward in a horizontal direction, shot away, and only after a few blocks did Oo and Karjaljaraba breathe easily again. Karjaljaraba turned his head back from a perusal of the street behind them.

"Nobody following," he exulted. "Now we can go ahead and take possession of the Statue of Liberty. Oo, I do not believe it is possible to thoroughly understand human affairs!"

Oo was lost in thought. Finally he turned, dropping his hand sadly on Karjaljaraba's knee. "No, Karjaljaraba," he said mournfully. "We aren't going to take possession of the Lady. We can't."

Karjaljaraba was horrified. "What? But, Oo—wasn't that our whole purpose? Isn't that the reason we became Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler? Didn't we agree between us that there wasn't any harm in selling the planet?"

"I'm sorry, Karjaljaraba," Oo was gentle. "I realize how much you wanted liberty. I wanted it myself. But we have to give it up. There's no other course open to us. We have done Harry Robertson and Angus Pandler and Mary Lou a great deal of harm. We must try to undo it, no matter how much it hurts us personally."

Karjaljaraba was grief-stricken. His human throat choked up. He brokenly nodded his assent.

"But how will we go about it?"

"By regaining possession of the million and a half dollars. Then we'll simply give the money back to Randolph and he'll give us the ownership of the planet again. With our peculiar abilities, Karjaljaraba, we shouldn't have any trouble at all."

It was a nerve-wracked gravitomobile driver who finally drew up in an alley beside a ramshackle dwelling and accepted

bills which Oo took out of the wallet which had been duplicated inside his tuxedo. Oo and Karjaljaraba had not known the name of the street where the swindler had sold them the Statue of Liberty, but they remembered the surroundings. By much pointing and "turn right here" and "turn left here" they had arrived at their destination. When Oo instructed the driver to wait, that individual snarled at them apologetically.

Oo suspected the cause of the driver's unhappiness. He said apologetically, "If you know where John Huggins Randolph lives, you may choose your own route." He added, for he was fast approaching an understanding of human motives, "If you wait, we will give you twice as many iron men as the occasion demands."

It was evident that the driver knew where Randolph lived, and also that Oo's powers of persuasion were strong. The driver would wait.

Oo nodded in satisfaction. He beckoned Karjaljaraba, and the two creatures from the planet Klutz melted away into the shadows, up a short flight of wooden stairs and down the length of a long, unlit porch. Oo remembered his way very well and pushed open a door. They stood in a dark hallway which smelled strongly of pungent food odors. There was another door in front of them. Oo softly tried the knob. It was locked.

Karjaljaraba used telepathy for quietness' sake. *It is extremely possible that the human we seek isn't here, Oo.*

Oo was disappointed. *Nevertheless, we must make certain.*

Although Oo had wanted to use Harry Robertson's body to make the exchange of the Statue of Liberty for the million and a half dollars, there was no other way for them to get in, apparently, than to go back to their original protoplasmic bodies. They could have knocked on the door, Oo knew, but somehow he was beginning to believe that the man they were seeking would not be anxious to see them again.

They immediately lost their human form, and were nothing more than wetly gleaming puddles on the odorless floor. Oo, however, was holding the deed to the Statue of Liberty in one pseudopod. They trickled under the door into a somewhat relieved darkness. There was a crack of light shining from another door. In another moment they were quietly huddled in a

corner of the next room, only part of which was illuminated with a wall lamp. Under the lamp, the fat, greasy man was sitting over a table. His expression was gloating. Spread out on the table was the million and a half dollars. While the two creatures watched, the fat, greasy man scooped the bills up excitedly and let them flutter down again in a green cloud.

"Hoo-ahs!" His breath came out noisily.

What do you pick up from an analysis of his thoughts? queried Karjaljaraba. Now that they were back in their real form, their telepathic powers could be used on other creatures than themselves. *The impression I get is of evil.*

Oo agreed with him. *The first truly evil human we've run across, I believe. Furthermore, as a compensation, he has extremely religious tendencies. Religion, he amplified for Karjaljaraba's benefit, is something people get when they have a great deal of trouble. I now suspect, Karjaljaraba, that this man played us for suckers. That's the phrase that comes to me, anyway. Exactly how he played us for suckers, I don't know. But it seems obvious that he figures he has gained a great deal more from the transaction than we have. Therefore it seems that the only way we could convince him to take the Statue of Liberty back and give us the money would be to appeal to his religious sense.*

Perhaps, Karjaljaraba suggested hopefully, you could become his conscience.

Excellent! Oo enthused.

It took Oo about twenty minutes to become the swindler's conscience—that is, to become a duplicate of the swindler. During this time the fat man was entirely absorbed in his newly acquired fortune. He never raised his eyes until suddenly, from out of the circle of darkness which hemmed him in, he heard somebody clearing his throat.

"Beg pardon, bud," said Oo huskily, moving his corpulent body into the circle of light.

The swindler's chair clattered back. He leaped to his feet, his eyes bulging. "What the hell!" he half screamed. "Who're you?"

"Your conscience," said Oo, leering. "I been casin' you for some time now. The Black Maria's on your trail. It's the big school for you, or maybe the cold-meat

cart." As an afterthought, Oo added, "You grifter. You gill, You flimflammer."

The flimflammer slowly backed up against the wall, his face going slowly white. "Yeah?" he said idiotically. "Yeah?"

"Sure thing," said Oo wisely, advancing a step. "You dirty chiseler."

"Me?" said the grifter in a somewhat strained tone.

"Yeah, you."

"I'm crooked," said the gill humbly. "It's me, in the flesh."

"I'm your conscience," said Oo. "I'm an Oregon boot on your foot, pal. I never go on the lam, see? I never do a fadeout. I never take a powder. Get it, lug? Okay, slug. I'm on the muscle today, louse, and I'm here to lay it to you—or else. See?"

The swindler slowly began to slide down the wall. "I—" he said in a strangled voice.

"Quee down, mug! Pull in your neck, pinhead. Also, button your lip. Play along with me or you'll be weeping and waiting with the rest of the stir-pokes, and maybe taking the electric cure with an O'Shaughnessy pardon, you punk. I'm a right guy, Sam, but if somebody runs a reader in on you for shaking down a couple of slob, I'll be able to do just as much for you as a rumbeak with a milk-spiller soloing against you in the blab-chair."

The swindler sagged down; his eyes rolled; he mumbled, "Why the hell don't you speak English?"—and fainted dead away.

He hit the floor with a fat thud, rolled over, jerked and stopped in an awkwardly contorted position with his head canted against the wall.

Oo gulped. He bent over the prostrate man. "Apparently," he said, in a surprised tone, "his conscience got the better of him. This is excellent, Karjaljaraba. If I interpret the situation correctly, this slob, having a similar advantage over us, would pocket the swag, make his getaway and steer clear of shamuses."

"I don't profess," said Karjaljaraba in an injured tone, "to know the content of your speech."

Oo performed a human chuckle.

Five minutes later, Oo—the swindler—walked from the shack. Behind him, the real swindler had in his hand the deed of ownership for the Statue of Liberty. Neither Oo nor Karjaljaraba had been able to come to any conclusion other than that

the exchange should be completely even; it was the way things were done, they reasoned.

In the satchel which Oo carried were a million and a half dollars—and the protoplasmic mass that was Karjaljaraba.

The cab driver took one look at Oo, dropped his jaw and looked tired of life and its complexities.

"I thought—" he said in a drugged tone.

"Never mind what you thought, Ralph! I left my pal back in the joint and I got me into a new outfit. It ain't any thousand-mile outfit, and it may have a few seam squirrels, but I'm not hep to any classy shes, so what? So make it snappy, give 'er the gas and let 'er roll!"

Oo settled back against the seat, and the gravitomobile rolled.

CHAPTER IV

FAIR EXCHANGE

Oo had difficulty keeping his balance, his newly-acquired fat stomach bothered him so, but he waddled at a swift pace up a tree-bordered walk toward the door of John Huggins Randolph's suburban home. He stopped at the door. Karjaljaraba stuck half of himself out of the satchel, inserted a pseudopod under the door and up to the catch. The door swung open and Oo went quickly up the stairs, Karjaljaraba drawing himself back into the satchel.

There was a light in an upstairs room. Oo paused in the hallway. There was a great deal of noise, the jabbering of indignant, irate human voices coming from Randolph's study.

"All right! All right!" a bull voice roared. "Break it up, break it up!"

"I refuse to break it up, officer!" came Randolph's heated voice. "I leave it up to you. These people come here in the middle of the night and bring the law with them as a threat to make me give up property which was duly vested into my possession by the signature of one Harry Robertson in a perfectly legal manner."

"I did not sign my name to any of your slimy legal papers!" somebody yelled. "All the while I was signing my name I wasn't

there at all. I was back in my rooms, hypnotized. Randolph has been trying for months to get hold of my planet. He listened to my speech last night—only it wasn't me at all—"

"And I was there while he was speaking and it didn't make any sense!" Mary Lou shrieked. "After they left the stage—"

"After who left the stage?" said the officer in a deadly tone.

"After Harry and Angus left the stage! Then I went back to the hotel rooms—only it wasn't really Angus and Harry—and I heard Angus and Harry's breath in the closet and there they were, dead to the world! Then Angus and Harry came in—I wish I'd used the gun on them!"

"Sweet heaven!" intoned the officer. "If I had patience!"

"But it's true, officer," said the graver voice. "There's nothing particularly fantastic about it. These amoebas—" It was Angus Pandler talking.

Randolph broke in, wildly protesting. Voices crescendoed, and were chopped away by the officer's howl.

"Now see here, miss," the officer said, almost inarticulately, after a moment of silence. "And you, Mr. Robertson and Mr. Pandler. I don't know what's been going on, but you ain't got a thing to hold Mr. Randolph on. Furthermore, I ain't goin' to hold him. There's better ways of risking a demotion or maybe being thrown off the force altogether. If you want to take the case to court, that's okay and I'll wish you lots of luck—you'll need it. But I'm leaving."

Oo telepathed to Karjaljaraba. *The situation looks very bad, Karjaljaraba. Unless we do something quick the battle may be lost. Search the minds of the beings in the room. If you come across anything important telepath it to me. In the meantime, be careful not to eat any of that money.*

Oo crossed the threshold and ran headlong into the beefy-faced officer, who was just charging out. The officer staggered back. He looked at Oo and made an involuntary motion toward his holstered thermospray.

"Fishface! What the hell you doin' out of stir?"

The officer lunged, his eyes gleaming triumphantly. He tore Oo's hand from the

satchel, brought his two wrists together. By the time Oo got his wits back, two shiny circlets of metal bound his hands fast.

He fell into a reflex cringing motion, his eyes sweeping fearfully over the staring group of humans, and resting finally on Randolph. "You got to get me out of this, Johnnie," he suddenly blurted. "I come up here to divvy the take, but I ain't going to let you play me for an Al Joe and then ring a flathead in on me. I ain't any addle-cove, see? I'll do some bat-carrying on my own hook, and we'll both earn blood-money. Blow wise, Johnny, you got the bull-horror same as me."

In the paralyzed silence which followed, during which the officer's jaw slowly went slack, his eyes turning toward Randolph, during which Randolph himself opened and closed his lips in a vain effort at speech, Karjaljaraba coolly telepathed, *Excellent, Oo. You're on the right track. I have left the satchel and am now close enough to Randolph to search deeply through his libido. As a starter, I've found a subject which may be labeled, "Incident on Titan."*

Randolph purpled. "Quit looking at me like that, Officer!" he barked. "I don't know this man from Adam. This is the first time I've seen him in my whole life. How he got in the house I haven't got the slightest idea. Unless," he added, swinging savagely on Harry Robertson, "this is part of a plan to take from me what is rightfully mine."

"Don't be silly," Robertson said coldly. He took a pugnacious step toward Randolph. "Give me the slightest excuse," he threatened, "and I'll pound you to a pulp. You've tried to get hold of my planet before in ways that weren't strictly on the up-and-up. I wouldn't put it past you to bring this hoodlum into it to further some crooked scheme of your own."

"Yeah?" said the officer, staring at Randolph with renewed interest. "Yeah?"

"For instance," said Robertson, "what's in that satchel?"

He took a quick step forward, grabbed up the satchel, and unzipped it. The officer craned his neck.

"Money!"

"It's the same money that was swindled from the amoebas!" Mary Lou burst out in high excitement. "Randolph and the swindler were working together, Officer!"

"That's a lie!" Randolph roared. He plowed between Harry and Mary Lou and grabbed Oo by the shoulders and shook him madly. "You scoundrel! You liar! Come clean about this thing, or by heaven I'll see that you get sent up for life. You petty crook! What's the straight of this?"

"Incident on Titan," Oo leered, loud enough for Randolph to hear. "I'll spill the beans, Johnnie, if you don't do the right thing by me, see? Maybe you better give the Robertson lob a clean bill about that planet, too. Incident on Titan, Johnnie." Oo leered again. "Grease that flatfoot's palm, sap."

Randolph fell back from Oo, his eyes bulging. "I—" he said. "That is—"

He stopped, gulping, his eyes fixed on Oo in horrified fascination. Then he turned slowly around.

"There has been," he whispered, "a terrible mistake."

"Oh!" Mary Lou uttered the ejaculation with a scream. She jumped back from Randolph, her hand to her throat. Her face was burning a brilliant red. "Oh! Mr. Randolph! Incident on Titan!"

Randolph was suddenly energized with motion. His hand dived into his coat pocket, came out with a billfold. He grabbed a handful of bills and thrust it wildly at the officer. "This is yours," he chattered. "As I say, we have all been in error. Please go. Leave Fishface in—ah—my custody. Ownership of the planet, of course, will be settled satisfactorily."

The bluecoat looked stunned. "I'm not supposed to—" he began weakly. But by that time he had taken the bills.

"Okay!" he scowled. "Mum's the word on this whole deal. As for you, Fishface—" He kicked Fishface in the shins. Oo barely restrained a gasp of pain. He held out his hands and the officer unlocked the cuffs, stuck them in his pocket, and stalked from the room.

Mary Lou, ecstatically hugging a somewhat confused Harry Robertson's arm, said warmly, "Okay, Fishface! Thanks! You can go now, and give your pal my love!" She winked at him. It was evident she knew Oo was an amoeba.

"Sure thing," said Oo easily. "Just remember not to let Randolph scrix you. You can always throw the guts—you got

the goods on him, see? He's got to treat you solid, or he'll have plenty of schoolmates. Think I'll hit the streets. By!" He winked back at Mary Lou.

Oo clumped down the stairs hurriedly. Outside the house he was not at all surprised when the officer jumped out from behind a telephone pole with a yell of glee. Oo found cuffs on his wrists again.

Oo said, "Listen, sham, I ain't as famous as I look and I'm tired of seeing you make the ruffle with this jewelry, gunsel. If you don't watch out I'm going to twist off your handle and stuff it down your gutter lane. I'm a Dillingery eel, pal, and I ain't goin' to fall for the general principle just because an elbow wants me to dress into numbers. Watch me duck the nut!"

Thereupon Oo dissolved into a protoplasmic mass, reached out with a pseudopod, wrapped it around the officer's legs and brought him down smash on his astounded posterior. Oo left him there and trickled away up the street until he caught up with Karjaljaraba, who had telepathed his presence.

"A complete victory!" Oo exulted. "Karjaljaraba, this leaves me with a feeling of satisfaction. Of course, we failed to attain our objective, but we've had fun, even if it has been a little harrowing at times. Besides, I have a feeling that there would have been some skeptics who would not be convinced that we owned liberty. So perhaps it's just as well. What I want to know now is: What did you find in Randolph's libido that you telepathed to Mary Lou so that he'd be sure to give the planet back?"

"Well, there were really two incidents on Titan. One dealt with embezzlement on a grand scale, the other dealt with a woman." Karjaljaraba told Oo about the woman as they traveled toward the spaceport. However, neither of the two alien creatures from the planet Klutz understood why Mary Lou's face got red. They were still discussing it a half hour later when they draw themselves aboard a gravitobile which was going in their direction.



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Garments of Doom

Slain by their own strength, trapped by their own science, the invaders from Vega learned too late the folly of trusting to the machine that had told them that Earthmen were tiny, weak, stupid.

But in its way—the machine had been absolutely right!

By WILLIAM MORRISON

A THIN shaft of light shot out to the wall map from the small formless body of Banzor the Conqueror, and centered upon one of the tiny planets scattered about the huge central sun. "This is the one," declared Banzor. "The one with the single satellite. Shall we overcome it now, or put off its conquest until we can assemble a larger fleet?"

The War Council sat in deathly silence for a moment. No one wished to venture an opinion without knowing what Banzor himself thought. And Banzor, his small, boneless lump of flesh and blood lost within the mass of wheels and rods that served him as a body, had no opinion. He was still in the process of making up his mind. That made things difficult.

Vlran, one of his abler generals, finally found courage to say, "It is my opinion, Lord Banzor, that we should leave this planet alone. We have already conquered more worlds than we knew to exist. Let us go home to our own star and enjoy the benefits of our victories."

"If we go home now, there can be no more attempt at conquest for centuries. The trip takes too long."

"No harm will be done. There will still be something for our successors to accomplish."

Dvorg, envious of Vlran, was almost certain to take the side opposite his. He suggested, "Perhaps we should conquer this one planet and *then* talk of going home. It is impossible that its inhabitants have reached our level of civilization, or else they would have conquered their entire system. We can destroy them with

only a small fraction of our strength. The task is hardly worth discussing."

"There, Dvorg, you are wrong," observed Banzor himself thoughtfully. "The creatures are undoubtedly feeble, but we do not yet know how feeble. We must learn before attacking. Remember the red planet. Its inhabitants gave us considerable trouble, destroyed much of our equipment before we finally subdued them."

Dvorg said humbly, "You are right, Lord Banzor, and I spoke too hastily. We must delay, and rebuild our equipment before launching an attack."

"You are wrong again," remarked Banzor. Dvorg's small body seemed to shrink at the rebuff. "We have no time to waste in rebuilding our equipment. When I spoke of assembling a larger fleet I thought of returning to our native star to see that all is going well in my absence. That is the choice that confronts us. Either we attack now, with the equipment we have left, or we return home."

"To decide that question we need information we do not have," pointed out Vlran.

Banzor said approvingly, "You see exactly the point I wished to make, Vlran. We do not have the information, but there should be little difficulty in our acquiring it." One of the levers that constituted his mechanical body began to hum. "It appears that we have run across the trail of the two-legged creatures we are talking of destroying."

"I did not know they were two-legged," said Vlran.

"Nor did I. I learned but a few moments ago."

A MECHANICAL body glided into the room like a monstrous spider, summoned by Banzor. The small creature within waited respectfully. The conqueror said, "You, Captain, discovered the ship. Tell us what you found?"

The captain spoke hesitantly. "The ship was abandoned with no trace of any crew member or passenger."

"You are sure it came from the third planet?"

"There can be no doubt, Lord Banzor. Its course had been plotted on a three-dimensional chart."

"Good. What else did you learn?"

"The ship was of the same type as those used by the people of the red planet. At first we thought both planets might be inhabited by the same race. We learned better from a photograph of the inhabitants."

"Excellent."

"We decided then that the ship had been built by those of the red planet. The others lacked the intelligence to undertake interplanetary travel."

"It will be an easy conquest," put in Dvorg.

Banzor said reprovingly, "Do not be so hasty, Dvorg. Do you have the photograph, Captain?"

The photograph was at hand. Banzor stared at it in silence for a moment. "Two-legged, as I have said, like those of the red planet. But smaller, less powerful in appearance. And clothed more simply than those of the red planet."

"They are probably in a state of savagery," said Dvorg, hoping that this time Banzor would agree with him.

"Possibly. But it is wrong to jump to conclusions. Anything else, Captain?"

"We discovered a few traces of writing on the ship, but the samples were undecipherable. We concluded that the ship had been on its way to the red planet, guided by the inhabitants of the latter, when our victory became known. It had been abandoned because its crew feared attracting our attention. They must have taken to a small, inconspicuous lifeboat."

"These are speculations. Any cargo?" asked Banzor.

"Merely clothes."

"Ah! Had the clothes been worn?"

"It appears so. The nature of wearing the clothes is obvious, Lord Banzor, from the photograph."

"Yes, I see." His body began to hum again. To the captain he said, "You are dismissed."

The captain left, to be replaced a moment later by another spiderlike body. Banzor said, "You are Melgul, the scientist, are you not?"

"Yes, Lord Banzor. I have invented a machine—"

"I know all about it." Banzor, who was proud of keeping up with scientific advances, explained to the others, "Melgul's machine analyzes the characters of individuals and races from the clothes they wear. Contact with the wearers changes the molecular structure of the clothes, and Melgul is able to measure this change." He turned to the scientist again. "Analyze the clothes we have captured, and make your report as soon as possible. How long will the process take?"

"An hour at most."

"Take two hours, if necessary. But let the report be accurate."

Melgul withdrew. Banzor said, "I am assuming that the report will be favorable to our purposes. If it is not, we need no plans. We simply return home. But if it is, this is how we shall attack—"

THE others listened in silence. Banzor fancied himself as a military theoretician, and to have interrupted or raised a question as to the correctness of his ideas might have meant death. Two hours passed slowly, and then Melgul appeared again.

"You are not quite so prompt as you had claimed," observed Banzor. "Do you have your report?"

"It is ready. I have delayed so long in order to check it twice. My assistants have also made the analysis. Their results agree with mine."

"And what have you found about the inhabitants of the third planet?"

Melgul said slowly, "We have analyzed a hundred garments, so there can be no substantial error due to inaccurate sampling. The result is almost unbelievable. The inhabitants of the third planet are of very weak minds."

"Less intelligent than those of the red planet?"

"There can be no comparison."

"Are they of sufficient intelligence to have built a spaceship?"

"No, Lord Banzor. It must have been built for them."

There was a look of satisfaction on everyone's face.

Banzor asked, "What else?"

"They are headstrong individualists, uncooperative, victims of their own stupidity and bad tempers. At the same time they are so simple-minded that their good will is easy to win. After they are conquered they can be won over by trivial gifts."

"Such as their own clothes that we can return to them?"

"Yes, Lord Banzor."

Banzor was pleased. "Are there any other qualities that you have discovered?"

"I have prepared a full report in technical language. But almost every quality is to their discredit."

Banzor said, "I am interested chiefly in their lack of intelligence."

"I repeat that they have almost none. They lack even the ability to care for their own needs. It is probable that some higher race, like the one on the red planet, acts as their protector."

"Then they can offer us no opposition. We attack at once. . . ."

It had been a hard battle, and Captain Macklin, gazing at the mass of wreckage that had been the mechanical body of Lord Banzor, Ruler of the Planet Tirania, Conqueror of Solar Systems, Master of the Universe, etc., finally located the lump of flesh and blood that had directed the destinies of so many billions of individuals.

His companion, Captain Farrel, remarked, "So they were organic, with mechanical bodies. I had an idea at first that they were just robots."

Macklin shook his head. "We knew they weren't robots from the reports the Martian colony sent us. Well, we've got our revenge for what happened on Mars."

"What star did they come from?"

Macklin shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Our experts seem to favor Vega, but I have an idea that their home was a bit nearer. At any rate, we're safe from any other attacks for years, and meanwhile we have time to prepare."

Farrel's eyes wandered around what had been a prosperous city. Only the wreckage of war machines was visible now, scattered over the ugly slag into which the city had

been molten. "It's a little frightening," he admitted, "when you consider the vast scale of the battle. I don't think there's a continent left untouched. And it was all over in a day."

"What gets me," said Macklin, "is why they failed. If they could defeat our colony on Mars, they should have been able to defeat us. But they seem to have gone ahead without any preparation. Why?"

"They underestimated us."

"Again, why? Didn't they know we were of the same race as the Martians?"

"Apparently not."

Macklin exclaimed suddenly, "Say, look what's here. One of our own spaceships! A freighter!"

They found the hatch of the ship on the upper side, but the sliding door was immovable. Macklin blasted an opening in the hull, and after it had cooled off they climbed in and looked around.

"It just don't make sense," said Farrel helplessly.

"I don't get it either. The ship must have been on its way to Mars to supply the colonists there. They're short on textiles, so Interplanetary Supply has to ship them cloth and clothes. But why the devil did the invaders think the cargo was worth taking along with them?"

"You've got me. A queer bunch, these invaders. But, Macklin, where's the picture that Interplanetary Supply usually has on the walls to advertise their products? It's practically their trademark."

"You mean the one showing the new-fangled way of wearing the things?"

"That's it."

Macklin said, "For some reason or other the invaders have removed that."

"You don't suppose they were going to use the things themselves, and wanted to study the model, do you? After all, they did have peculiar bodies."

"I don't suppose anything. It's one of those mysteries," decided Macklin, "that I'm afraid we'll never solve. Probably unimportant, though. But it's certainly baffling. The most dangerous invaders our solar system has ever seen—and they drag along with them a ship full of babies' diapers!"

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CIRCLE OF YOUTH

Youth turns to age, and age grows younger—on the strange
chill moon of Neptune, where a monster race played with
human lives, and time had gone mad!

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

CALDWELL could have found the place with his eyes shut. Gray, grotesquely distorted rocks guarded the cave entrance, and the soil underfoot seemed to have a strange, weaving life of its own. Almost he sighed with relief as it caressed his calloused soles.

Falling to his knees, he scooped it up in handfuls. It was softer than a woman's skin and faintly luminous. His brain spun dizzily as if sifted between his fingers.

Take it easy, guy, it seemed to whisper to him in the dim Neptunelight. There's plenty of me here, and you don't have to worry about sharing me with anyone. Lonely? Sure, you'll be lonely sitting around waiting for another ship to settle down beside the wreck of the one you came in. But just look at me! Is there anything in civilization you'd rather have than a fistful of me?

"No," he grunted. "Hell, no."

He was lying, of course. In the ship he had wrecked was a girl he couldn't stop thinking about. She was still very much alive, but she wouldn't even talk to him. Worse, there was a lad in the wreck with her who could sympathize with the way she felt.

Almost without thinking he had lifted his fist and sent the lad sprawling with a savage blow. He was sorry now, but it

couldn't be helped. The lad had wanted to bail out and take the girl with him. He had faced Caldwell belligerently, his speech thickening.

"Miss Blake will bail out with me, you hear? It's too late now to save the ship. We'll crash anyway. We'll—"

Caldwell's big, rising fist had silenced the lad right in the middle of a sentence. Although Caldwell was a man of kindly instincts he could be as brutal as an ether twister when he had a thrumming deck under him. Saving his ship came first with him and he didn't care who knew it—least of all a brash recruit just out of training school and a little chit of a girl.

A man had to serve, didn't he? Every man at his post—and to blazes with the consequences!

The ship had crashed, sure. But right up to the last moment Caldwell had remained with his feet firm-planted on the thrumming deck, fighting to save his command.

He expected as much from others.

Miss Blake was a first-class navigator, and he—had needed her. His stubby fingers were too clumsy to adjust the delicate units in the control room, and to have attempted to do so would have meant breaking faith with the company.

TWO years before, a Neptune Company administrator had selected Caldwell from a long list of senior commanders as the right man for a hazardous undertaking. There were caverns on Neptune's huge satellite that were rich in uranium, and for several years now the company had been mining the stuff on an unprecedented scale. Civilization's needs could not be shelved, come hell or high water.

Caldwell had made the trip in a slim wasp ship, and stumbled on a cave rich in deposits. He had returned to Earth, submitted a report, and been given a new command with two assistants. Unfortunately, a gravity-plate had fused when they were close to the great satellite of the frozen planet. The ship was now a telescoped mass of wreckage.

Miraculously Janet Blake and young Winters had survived, along with a tired old man who was standing now with naked feet at the entrance of a cave he could have found with his eyes shut.

Old man? Well, he was forty-two, and his bones ached, and all the drive had gone out of him. He was pretending that the gold dust he was sifting through his fingers was sufficient compensation for the loss of his ship, and not succeeding very well. Deep inside the cave he would find company pay-dirt, but at the entrance was sprinkled a different kind of wealth.

Caldwell knew that an article in the company charter granted mining privileges to men who assumed company risks, whether they wore stripes on their sleeves or were humble engine-room mechanics. He could stake out a claim to the gold which no one on Earth could dispute—no one. But he was not on Earth now.

He stood up despairingly, letting the yellow grains drain from his palm. Save for the oxygen mask which covered the lower part of his face he was dressed as though for a tropical yachting cruise on Earth. A porous-weave shirt clung to his drenched torso, and his trousers terminated at his knees. "Blast-furnace breeches" they were called in the argot of the space lanes. He had kicked of his shoes because he liked the feel of the hot soil against his calloused soles.

Now he shivered a little, but not from the cold. It was seldom chilly on Neptune's huge satellite. From vents in the rugged terrain, jets of volcanic vapor arose, warding off the cold of space and

his hands. There was nothing tangible producing a heavy film of protective gases overhead.

Raising his wrist lamp, Caldwell stabbed at the murk with a thin pencil of radiance. It was ridiculous, of course, but for an instant he had imagined—

A cold chill inched along his spine.

Just beyond the glow there was a vague blur of movement, as though something huge and misshapen had drawn near to the cave mouth and was watching him.

Savagely cursing himself for a ninny he strode forward into the darkness. Like most blunt men of action Caldwell was at a disadvantage when denied the use of inside the cave for yards, and the instant he clicked off his wrist lamp his imagination ran riot, filling the darkness with receding shapes that seemed to beckon him onward.

He was a hundred feet from the entrance when he saw the circle of radiance. It was hovering directly in his path, blotting out the luminous crevices on both sides of the cavern. He had clicked off his lamp to study the radioactive glimmer, but quickly he raised his wrist and directed a thin stream of light at it.

It seemed to darken and almost disappear in the ray from the little lamp. Its circumference remained faintly luminous and he had to strain to see beyond it. But unmistakably the fieriness had gone out of it. It was at least eight feet in diameter and filled now with pulsing shreds of darkness.

Suddenly it was advancing upon him, so swiftly that he had no time to leap back or aside. He could see the cave wall behind it, and the faintly luminous bulk of something enormous crouching in darkness a little to the left of the onrushing loop. Then a coldness swept over him and the entire top of his head seemed to explode.

WHEN he came to, the circle had vanished. For an instant he was strangely giddy. When he sat up, the cavern pinwheeled and jagged lines danced before his vision. Swaying he got to his feet, shook his head to clear it.

"Great Scott," he muttered aloud to the silences. From all sides the cavern walls echoed back: *Great Scott! Great Scott! Great Scott!*

Somehow his depression had vanished. He felt strangely exultant, springy of step. Perhaps the little chit of a girl would get over her resentment and speak to him again. Perhaps he could make her see things in a sensible light. As for the raw recruit—he'd approach the lad with a smile, stretch out a paw.

"I'm not your skipper here, lad. Just call me 'Jim,'" he'd say. And if the kid had the makings, he'd break into a grin a yard wide and come back with: "Sure thing, old man. And I deserved that sock."

Well, he'd better be getting back to the wreck. No telling what had happened in his absence. He had left Janet brewing some black coffee, and the kid nursing a swollen jaw and looking her way.

"Heck," he grumbled, looking down and noticing he had cut his foot on the gravel cavebed. The cut had not been there an instant before. It was curious, but it followed the course of an old scar, branching from between his toes and snaking up toward his ankle. He shrugged and threaded his way out of the cave with his wrist lamp shedding a spectral radiance on the tumbled rocks ahead of him. . . .

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Five minutes later he was approaching the wreck with his shoulders thrown back and his stride strangely buoyant. The gray hull of the shattered spaceship loomed up ghostly out of the murk, reminding him of an etching under glass. No lights showed anywhere, and when he shouted his voice brought only answering echoes from the hollow caverns on the lee side of the telescoped vessel.

A slight twinge of bitterness returned to plague him. They were still nursing a grudge, apparently. The little chit of a girl, and—

His thoughts congealed. Someone was coming toward him through the murk, swaying, stumbling, crying out hoarsely. He stood rigid, sweat breaking out all over him as his wrist lamp pierced the gloom like an exploring eye.

Into the beam the girl staggered, throwing out her arms and falling forward upon her face. As she did so, something huge behind her, that looked like an animated tree bole, gnarled and misshapen, moved swiftly away from the beam, and again Caldwell saw a ring of radiance approaching. As he stared in horror it rolled swiftly past him and receded into the murk.

He did not turn, but instead stumbled forward and fell to his knees beside the prostrate girl. Murmuring reassurances, he lifted her and stared down into her haggard face. She had opened her eyes and was staring up at him. Her face was drawn and lined, her hair gray. For an instant he did not recognize her.

"Who are you?" she moaned.

HE had no need to ask her the same question. She was no longer a young girl, but she was still beautiful. Instinctively his arms tightened about her in a protective embrace.

The ghastly thing that had occurred had not fully penetrated his consciousness, but he knew he was holding in his arms the woman he loved. She was perhaps thirty-eight, and he—

He looked down at his hands. They were not the hands of a man of forty, but rather those of a youth, hairy and strong. But the veins were no longer prominent, and that excess of muscular strength which comes in early middle age to men who had led strenuous lives seemed to be lacking now. The fingers were thinner, the wrists less sturdy, the—

God—oh, God. He raised his hand and felt his face. Gone was the thick stubble of beard which had covered his chin, and his flesh felt firmer to the touch.

The girl's pupils had dilated suddenly, and he knew that she had recognized him despite the change which must have stripped twenty years from his age and so unnerved him that he was shaking like a leaf.

"Jim," she murmured. "What has happened to us? Oh, my poor dear, we've—"

In utter silence he lifted her up and carried her into the ship. He could not trust himself to speak. If he was to hold fast to his sanity he must not allow her to confirm what he suspected until he was sure. Perhaps in the half-telescoped control room, with cold lights flooding down, the haggard look would leave her face. Perhaps he had exaggerated what he had seen. Perhaps there was some simpler explanation.

He hadn't exaggerated. Alone together before a shattered control board, the man and the woman stood facing each other, their lips white.

"I am no longer young," Janet whispered hoarsely. "And you are scarcely more than a boy."

Caldwell clasped her trembling hand. "Steady, dear. You'd better tell me exactly what happened."

"I saw a face," Janet said, shivering, "through the visiport. A horrible, lumpish, inhuman face—staring in. When I screamed, Harry came in from the mess room and saw it, too. I don't need to tell you how impulsive he is. He snatched up a heat gun and rushed out through the airlock."

She shuddered. "Jim, it was awful. I heard the gun go off and then—silence. I sat there for ten minutes digging my nails into my palms. Look—"

She extended her white palms toward him. They were as smooth as satin. Utter amazement seemed to sweep her as she stared down at them. Then she remembered and snapped her hands back to her side.

"Of course. I was younger then. The furrows I dug have vanished, together with—"

She let the sentence trail off.

Her lips had begun to tremble, and suddenly she was in Caldwell's arms. He held

her tightly, smoothing her hair and kissing her.

"Our minds haven't changed," he said gruffly. "Inwardly I'm still twice your age, and, heck, your eyes haven't changed. And outwardly you're as old as I should like you to be and not a day older. Remember I'm still a man of forty mentally, and you're *physically* about the right age for me. Thirty-four, I should say," he lied. "What are you looking so sad about?"

"Jim, don't let's kid ourselves," she said, with a queer twist of her lips. "I was the right age for you when I was twenty-two. I'm not old now, of course, but the girl you loved has simply—disappeared. But I'll always love you, Jim."

He said gruffly, "What happened when Harry failed to return?"

"I went out through the airlock, too; went out and looked around. I wasn't far from the ship when I saw that thing approaching. It was huge and bent and it moved with a shambling gait. I couldn't see its face very clearly in the murk, but its eyes—its eyes were horrible, Jim. It was carrying a kind of luminous hoop."

Caldwell nodded. "And then?"

"Then I saw you. The thing was coming toward me, and I was so frightened I lost my head, I guess. I should have ducked back into the ship, but I ran to you instead. The thing was almost upon me when I stumbled. The hoop rolled over me, and then everything went black. . . . Jim, do you think the hoop—"

Caldwell nodded grimly. "It must do something to time," he said. "It rolled over me, too. Perhaps if you go into it from one side you come out younger, and from the other—"

CALDWELL stiffened in sudden alarm.

The ship's gravity lock was swinging open, sending a thin vibration pulsing through the battered control room. Giving the girl's arm a reassuring squeeze, he strode from the compartment and padded down a wreckage-littered passageway in his bare feet, his face as grim as death.

The opening lock was sending a draft of damp air into the vessel and frosting the cold light bulbs overhead. But what halted Caldwell with a startled exclamation was not the opening portal, but the two utterly incongruous figures framed therein.

An old man, bent nearly double, was leading by the hand a small boy of eight

or ten. The old man's face was scarred and seamed and his bloodshot eyes stared up at Caldwell in piteous appeal from sockets almost as fleshless as those of a skull. The little boy was squirming about and kicking the old man in the shins. As Caldwell stared, he raised his eyes and gazed right at him.

"I'm reluctant to ask any favors, Captain," the boy said, "but I'm sunk deep in hell and I have no choice. If you can persuade this crazy fool to let go of me the torment may ease a little. I see you've gone back a few years, too. But at least you are still a man, while I—"

The boy's underlip quivered, and for an instant he seemed on the verge of tears. But he still kept looking at Caldwell as though he wanted to take a poke at him.

"Good God!" Caldwell choked, recognizing in the unruly brat the raw recruit he had sent sprawling a few hours before. "Harry, I—"

"He's my son," the old man mumbled. "Lost him long ago. Found him. Happy now."

Caldwell could tell at a glance that the old man was demented. His shrunken features twitched and he spoke in a chanting singsong, as though his speech had raced ahead of his thoughts and lost touch with reality.

Caldwell did not waste time trying to reason with him. Instead he gripped the ancient one's scrawny wrist and freed the boy's hand by prying open fingers that seemed to writhe in his clasp.

Instantly the boy leapt back against the passageway bulkhead, the hostility ebbing from his gaze.

"That was decent of you," he choked.

"I can understand what you mean about being in hell," Caldwell said softly. "Janet and I have had a taste of it, too. You'd better go to the sick bay and mix yourself a sedative. Then lie down, get some rest. I'm going to question this bird."

"He's—" The boy made a rotary motion with his forefinger close to his forehead.

"I'm afraid so," Caldwell agreed. "But he may be able to tell us more than we know. Did you see a fiery ring, too, lad?"

Harry Winters groaned. "Something snatched the heat gun from my hand. And then—yes, I saw a ring all right. It knocked me down, and I guess I passed through. When I picked myself up I was like this."

"Yes. Well, it's the sick bay for you."

Setting his lips, the boy saluted and swung about on his heels.

TEN minutes later Caldwell sat on a corrugated metal chest in the stern rocket room, talking to the dodderer. He had refused to let Janet see the old man. There was something tragic and terrible in the fixity of his gaze and his pallor, and his speech that was like a continuous scream.

"Yes, yes, yes, it is worse than you dream. It is a sacred rite with them—almost religious. They pass through and a new strength flows into them. We humans are guinea pigs to them. Yes, yes, yes, the ring makes us young; the ring makes us old. But they scarcely care. They have lost interest in human beings, lost interest now—"

"You mean there's some strange power inside the ring which restores the vigor of those ghostly creatures?" Caldwell prodded.

"Yes, yes," the old man babbled. "A space warp. Inside the circle space is warped in the direction of motion with the speed of light. People grow younger—Fitzgerald contraction. I was a physicist once. I figured it out. We came in the expedition ship *Silver Queen*, but I am alone now. The others went back too far in time.

"Too far—back too far. Some became squealing infants—some old. Old as I am, and more. Back and forth, and there was no escape. The creatures tormented us night and day. We were guinea pigs to them."

Sweat stood out in beads on Caldwell's forehead, but relentlessly he probed on. "And in the end they tired of experimenting?"

"Yes, yes," the old man babbled. "Some of us became little pink horrors, deformed, hideous. Mutant life is a very primitive stage. And some of us just disappeared. For many months now they have not troubled me. I am a poor, harmless old man. I live as I may. There are nourishing roots here, caves to hide in—"

When Caldwell stood up he was pale and shaken. "You'd better spend the night with us, grandpop," he said. "You look tired. Suppose you relax on that tarpaulin

over there, and think about the *Silver Queen*."

"The *Silver Queen*," the old man murmured. "Aye, she was a ship, lad."

When Caldwell left the rocket room he was careful to lock the door panel.

"So we're a new batch of guinea pigs," he muttered savagely to himself.

He told no one, not even Janet. Descending quietly to what was left of the ship's arsenal, he selected a magneto-tube with a firing range of sixty yards, and filled an ammunition belt with radioactive energy pellets.

It was a gamble, of course. "Desperate" flashed across his mind, but after a moment's thought he pasted a little mental black patch over the qualifying adjective.

He wasn't sure, though, that he ought to leave the ship unguarded. And yet the creatures had made no attempt to enter the hull, and probably wouldn't without provocation. Why should they go exploring when the guinea pigs stuck their necks out, the way he was doing?

He was climbing over a shattered gravity stabilizer in the depths of the wreck when he heard the scream. It was a prolonged and ghastly cry, unutterably terrifying. And it seemed to come from the end of the passageway along which he was moving. His heart stood still, and a cold shock went through him.

"Janet," he whispered hoarsely, and rushed along the passageway in his naked feet, oblivious to the jagged points of metal which projected from the sloping deck.

THE creature was standing in shadows at the end of the passageway. For an instant he had a glimpse of sunken eyes and a mouth like a gaping wound—cavernous, drooling. Then it turned and he saw only its enormous back, and Janet's kicking legs as it bore her away into the darkness.

A vise seemed to tighten about Caldwell's heart, and his lips parted in a despairing, half-articulate cry. In the narrow passageway the magneto-tube he was clasping was of no use to him, save as a suicide weapon.

Take it easy, a voice seemed to drone deep inside him. If you blast you'll tear a gaping hole in the vessel and shrivel yourself to a crisp. A lot of help you'll be to her then.

Groaning, he tore forward in pursuit of

the monstrous shape. Into smothering darkness he plunged, stumbling over tumbled heaps of metal as he forced his way deep into the hold of the half-telescoped vessel. Ahead of him he could hear harsh breathing and the pattering of footsteps.

The awful realization that Janet had either fainted or been silenced by a claw-like hand was almost too agonizing to endure.

The gap in the hold seemed to swim toward him out of the darkness. It was a mere lessening of the Stygian murk, a kind of ragged negation of light a few yards from his face. But instinctively he knew that it was one of the many small rents which had been torn in the vessel's hull by buckling gravity plates.

He was suddenly sure that the shape had emerged through the rent and was now outside the ship. For several seconds the utter stillness which now reigned within the hold had been preceded by scuffling sounds, as though the creature had experienced difficulty in lifting the girl up.

Caldwell emerged through the rent with his heart hammering against his ribs. For a tense, horrible instant he hung by one hand from a strip of ragged metal, scarcely realizing that the magneto-tube was still in his clasp.

Then his shoulders jerked, and he released his hold on the torn hull. Although the drop was a steep one, he landed squarely on his feet, swung about and stared frantically into the murk.

It might have been an illusion, but for a fleeting instant he thought he could discern a gathering together of the darkness far to the left of where he had landed—a kind of lumpish, animated pucker in the murk which was loping away from the ship with something white in its clasp.

THE minutes which followed had a quality of nightmarish unreality which increased with every lengthening of his stride. He did not move parallel to the ship, but directly away from it.

He felt horribly certain that the creature would head for the cave. He had encountered the circle there, and seen the vague outlines of its lumpish kin just outside the beam of his wrist-flash. He was sure that the cave was the lair of the grotesque monsters.

For interminable minutes he plodded

over the plain, every nerve in his body quivering. So distraught was he that when finally the dim and familiar rock structures came into view, weaving nebulously in a pale glow, his vision misted over and he saw only the vague outlines of uncouth shapes through the almost impenetrable murk.

Saw only moving outlines, until suddenly the glow crept across the soil toward him and he halted at the edge of it, a band of ice contracting about his heart.

At the entrance of the cave a huge rectangle stood, brimming with a fiery radiance. Into it, through it, out again on the other side a long line of the creatures were passing, their bent, misshapen bodies dripping radiance and their deep-socketed eyes uprolled.

In utter silence the lumpish creatures moved through the great luminous hoop, and yet there was that in their attitudes when they emerged that spoke more eloquently than words, that told of renewal and rebirth. The rectangle must be like the hoops—time warping, rejuvenating.

The creatures entering the energy square were bent and dispirited, drooping shapes of horror hardly able to stand. The ones emerging strode forth with great, rugose shoulders squared, their heads upraised.

Some instinct warned Caldwell he was standing too close to the nearest of the emerging monsters. He took refuge behind a boulder, dropping down on his stomach and elevating his magneto-tube as he did so.

Hardly had he arranged the complicated weapon to his satisfaction when into the spreading glow there strode another of the monsters, a limp human form in its clasp.

Caldwell bit down on his underlip to stifle an exclamation, and started fumbling in his ammunition belt, his eyes riveted with haggard intensity on Janet's white face.

Silently the creature took up its position at the end of the dwindling file of monsters awaiting their turn in line. Caldwell's flesh twitched, yet he did not take his eyes from the scene. His fingers moved silently, feeding energy pellets to the silently revolving magneto-tube. He had set the formidable weapon in motion and placed his thumb on the firing mechanism, but he dared not blast. Janet was too directly in the line of fire. The creature holding her was now less

than three yards from the square, raising her up as though—

Two more bent and drooping shapes passed into the square as he stared. Now only a single shape stood between his darling and the great luminous hoop, and suddenly a red mist engulfed his faculties and an agony of indecision racked him.

The creature threw Janet into the square with a single heave of its enormous shoulders. The instant it did so Caldwell fired.

The cyclonic blast of energy that tore across the cave mouth scooped a deep funnel in the soil and whirled the lumpish creatures about as though they were feathers in its path. On both sides of the square great shapes were lifted into the air and torn asunder.

Again and again Caldwell blasted, pumping energy pellets at the surviving monsters and sending sheets of flame zigzagging between them.

When he ceased firing the ground was strewn with unmoving, hideous fragments—a rugose limb, something that resembled a shoulder, faces upturned to the Neptune-light that brought a chill to his vitals.

At the base of the great stationary square lay a young girl, her arms outflung and her coppery hair aureoling her pale brow like a nimbus of rust-colored ectoplasm.

Slowly—so slowly that for an instant a terrible dread came upon him—her eyelids fluttered open.

"Darling," she whispered. "Oh, darling—"

"I MUST have been deep in the square when you blasted," she told him, hours later. They were back in the wreck, and he was looking at her as though he could not tear his eyes from her face.

The tall young man who had been sitting beside them rose slowly and walked out of the control room. An hour before he had been a boy, but he now stepped back into the square and now he was a man again. But he was not too happy about it. He had a rival now—a man as young as himself, but with a senior commander's stripes on his sleeve. For some ridiculous reason known only to himself, Caldwell had refused to step back. . . .

"Damn," Harry Winters muttered, and started fumbling in his jacket for a cigarette.

THE END

WAR GOD'S GAMBLE

By HARRY WALTON



His world would perish if he lost—and the fruits of victory would be taken from him if he won. But Flight Lieutenant Stirn had to take a mad gamble with destiny—at which he could not win honestly, and dared not cheat!

THE door segment slid aside with a brief hiss. One second later it shut soundlessly. In that interval Flight Lieutenant Stirn had entered the tiny, cylindrical cell. He stood just where he was, staring with horror-glazed eyes at nothing whatsoever.

At the table Navigation Officer Edmond threw down a card in his endless game of solitaire, observing Stirn keenly in one quick glance. He was deliberate in selecting a slender Martian cigarette from the pack at his elbow. Without a word he extended it to Stirn. Slow alarm crept into his expression as the lieutenant made no move toward it.

Edmond unfolded his lean bulk from the chair and came toward the other, whose eyes still took note of nothing. Abruptly the navigator's hand flicked out. The slap cracked loudly in the tiny cell; it left red welts on Stirn's cheek, but had no other effect.

Like a striking snake Edmond's hand flashed out again. Skilled fingers played an instant at the base of Stirn's neck. Abruptly they took their toll; the lieutenant buckled to the floor like a disjointed doll. Edmond caught him as he fell and

dragged him to one of the cots.

It was fifteen minutes before Stirn showed signs of recovering from the nerve paralysis induced by that touch, but when his eyes opened they were normal. He managed a wan smile as his glance locked with Edmond's.

"Hi, fellow!"

"Hi, Jerry. You were souped when you came in. I dished a neuro jolt. Have a tough go?"

A visible shudder shook Stirn's slight figure. "Hell on full jets. If I haven't aged fifty years, I'm good for ten thou. The full routine. That devil Gamirand."

Edmond lit a cigarette for him. "Go on, spill. Does you good."

Stirn paused to take a long drag. "Of course, Gamirand was polite as usual—officers' courtesy and all that. Full of regrets for what would happen if I didn't talk—as if this were the first time! Then he turned me over to the psychos. Those green ladies of hell! I honestly think it wouldn't be so bad if they were men instead."

"Their psychos are all women, even the therapists."

"These weren't healers," retorted Stirn.

"They gave me a needle and I floated off easy—but awake, you understand, and conscious. I'd have traded my pension for a neuro jolt the next half hour—"

"Prisoners of war shall not be subjected to physical torture of any kind," quoted Edmond bitterly. "We wrote the War Code out of the depths of our ignorance, and the Martians signed with their tongues in their cheeks. And yet we knew of psychosuggestion all the way from Mesmer in 1775."

"These harpies of Gamirand's go back ten thousand years before that," said Stirn. "They started easy—branding on the arms with a white-hot iron. Damned realistic, too, even before the—I mean the induction furnace, and the warm air it radiated, just like the real thing. Maybe they hurried it a bit at that. I remember the iron was black one moment, white-hot the next. Funny the things you think about even while your hide is frying."

"Gamirand came in to ask whether I could possibly give him a hint as to where our grand fleet might be gathering—said he wouldn't ask more of a brother officer. I invited him to hell. The irons vanished and of course there wasn't a mark on my arms, as he asked me to note. Then he said something about a superior race not resorting to crudities. I wonder what they call their own brand of hellishness?"

"I know. 'Certain nuances of the mind, which we find useful in dealing with the lower orders.' Unquote."

"Thanks. I'll cut the grisly details, except to say that they went on to pulling out fingernails, one at a time, and finished with a case of Martian cancer, all very vivid. By that time I—well, you saw me."

"Damn their guts!" exploded Edmond. "Why don't they dish it evenly at least? Why pick on you only?"

"Gamirand explained that. Your neurograph says you won't fold that way. I may. They don't waste effort."

"The block held? You didn't—"

"Spill? Not yet. But you know our psychos aren't in a class with the Marshies. I can feel the block slipping. You'd think knowing it's only hypersuggestion would help you stand it. By God, it doesn't! You live everything they dish out—everything. What good does it do to wake up afterwards and know it wasn't real?"

Edmond's fingers snapped the prison-issue cigarettes in two, his heel ground the

fragments viciously into the black plastic floor. "Get some sleep now. I want to think."

STIRN drifted off like a child. Twice Edmond paused in his pacing to look at him. He could kill Stirn now and end his agonies. Perhaps he should. The boyish lieutenant had suffered much and was sure to suffer more. He might break any day, any hour, and shriek out what the Marshies wanted to know—information that might cost Earth the war and her freedom.

But what right had he to decide on Stirn's death?

His pacing footsteps echoed to the high roof of their cylindrical prison, twenty-five feet above. The tiny twelve-foot circle of floor was furnished with two cots, two chairs, a table and sanitary arrangements. Clean, light and well ventilated, it fell just short of comfort. The Martians treated prisoners according to the letter of the Code, if not according to the spirit.

His own pacing around the circular cell began to tell on Edmond's nerves. Deliberately he sat down and lit another cigarette. He could not help noticing that his fingers trembled.

It was always like that after Stirn had been tortured. Two weeks of that, his own inactivity since the blasting of the *Medo* and their capture by a Martian cruiser, had left Edmond's nerves almost as raw as the lieutenant's.

If the neurograph ruled out torture in his case, what were the Martians holding him for? Ordinary prisoners were sent to a camp north of the capital. Yet they kept him here, made him watch Stirn suffer the agonies of the damned. What were they softening him up for?

He whirled at the low hiss that announced the opening of the door, but only in time to see it close behind Gamirand. The soft-footed Martian stood regally at ease, his eight-foot figure faultless in a white-and-gold uniform that admirably became his saffron complexion. He accorded Edmond the courtesy of clicking his heels together and snapping his left forearm smartly across his chest, palm down, in the Martian military salute.

A FEW words, if you please, Officer Edmond," said the other, stressing the sibilants in the manner of his kind.

"We have nothing to say to each other," returned Edmond curtly.

Gamirand smiled apologetically, yellow teeth gleaming. "You resent the treatment poor Lieutenant Stirn brings upon himself. But of course! I agree. It is deplorable that this accursed war should bring such a necessity upon us. Indeed, it is concerning the lieutenant that I wish to speak with you."

"Then I'll listen, promising nothing."

"Good." Instinctively the Martian had spoken in a low tone, and Edmond also, so as not to disturb the man on the cot. "Surely you know he is slowly breaking. That he resists us so magnificently is merely unfortunate, as much for him as for us. Once we break down the inhibiting block your psychologists have implanted in his subconscious, his mind will fail. It is inevitable—surely you have seen the signs."

"Come to the point!" rasped Edmond.

Gamirand sighed, thoughtfully twisted one of the two goatees that grew from his jowls. "You are an impatient race, ruled by emotion. A Martian would draw me out at greater length, if he could, hoping to gain thereby. But I shall come to the point as you ask. You yourself show the effect of our questioning of Lieutenant Stirn in a different way, yet as markedly as he does. You display the concern of the strong for the weak, so common in primitive cultures. Suffering nothing yourself, you have nevertheless reached a point where you are tortured by inaction. I offer you release."

"I'm still listening."

"The scouting launch of the *Medo* was not damaged when we took your ship. It lies outside the city, fueled and space-worthy. It is yours, together with safe-conduct past our defensive fleet, in return for your answer to one question."

"I'll give it to you now," said Edmond. "It's 'no'."

"You decide hastily," Gamirand retorted with a sneer. "Your life is safe, and your sanity. Can you say as much for Stirn's?"

Edmond made no reply.

"All we ask," the Martian continued, seeing that the shot had told, "is the rendezvous of your fleet. Does that insure our victory? Hardly—the battle is still to be fought. For a scrap of information, for a doubtful advantage, we are willing to pay a fair price—the freedom of two gallant

enemy officers. But even if it did insure our victory—surely it is to Earth's advantage that the war be shortened, particularly since a Martian victory is inevitable in view of Martian superiority."

"That," retorted Edmond, "is something you'll have to demonstrate before we'll believe it. Granting you had ten thousand years of written history before we learned that caves kept the rain off us, I wonder whether you haven't already started down the other side of the hill we're still climbing. Decadence is the name for it—"

He was pleased to see the quiver of Gamirand's twin goatees at this assault on his racial pride.

"Our superiority," returned the Martian stiffly, "is such as your race may not aspire to in ten times ten thousand years. It is inherent in our physical and mental character. What you call the subconscious mind is in us always under control. No Martian could be tortured subjectively, as you can be. Physically the differences are equally great. I can remain alert fifty hours without sleep or drugs, go ninety days without water, three hundred without food. Our very blood is different—that of my race yellow-green, unlike that of any other creatures on Mars—yours, I am told by officers who have seen your wounded, like that of our cattle!"

There was a long moment of silence.

"On your honor as an officer," said Edmond at last, "would Stirn recover if he were set free now?"

"Knowing you would ask, I inquired. He would."

Edmond stared doubtfully as his chest. Suddenly resolved, he unpinning the be-ribboned medal that hung there, and offered it to the astounded Martian, who took it gravely.

"Know what that is?" asked Edmond hoarsely.

Gamirand studied it. "The imprint evidently represents the solar system. Never having studied your heraldry, I cannot say what the black-and-white ribbon signifies."

"It's given for outstanding service in navigation—why I got it doesn't matter. No, don't give it back. I'd rather not wear it again. I'm going to make a deal."

Gamirand's features showed no surprise. "Excellent. You will be given safe-conduct as soon as our scouts can verify the infor-

mation you give us. It will be only a few hours."

"Not so fast. I'm not accepting your offer; I'm going to make one myself. For all your culture, you Martians are great gamblers. I'll play you for the information you want."

Gamirand stiffened. "This is no time for absurd humor."

"I'm not joking. You stay cooped up for two weeks facing two alternatives—to keep on watching a brother officer break under what those devils of yours are doing to him or to play the traitor—and see if you wouldn't welcome even a gambling chance."

"On what basis?"

"We play a game familiar to us both. If I lose, Stirn and I are set free in return for the information you want. You can check first, of course. But if I win, we're set free at once and tell you nothing."

Gamirand smiled sardonically. "Quite absurd, but how typical! I accept the terms. What shall the game be—your chess perhaps? I am well acquainted with it."

"Too well, I think, for my money," said Edmond dryly. "I prefer more of a gambler's game. Poker?"

Gamirand spread his hands. "I have never played it. Do you know our *Dianard*?"

Edmond shook his head. "The only Martian game I'd dare play is *Chianto*. Maybe you know—but why not *Chianto*?"

"Why not?" smiled Gamirand. "I shall send for tiles."

THE cell door opened to his mental command, and he left silently. Edmond gathered up the cards, wiped a few crumbs of tobacco off the table. But in turning away he upset the light chair. The clatter of its fall echoed and re-echoed from the rounded wall.

"Hello," came from Stirn a moment later. "What's up?"

Edmond whirled on him, frowning. "Spilled the chair. Sorry it woke you."

It was Stirn's turn to frown. "Something's up. Gamirand been here?"

"No. Better get back to sleep."

Stirn hunched about on the cot. Scarcely a minute later the door opened to admit Gamirand and an orderly, who placed a handsome platinum-bound plastoid chest on the table. When the man had left, the door slid soundlessly shut behind him.

Gamirand drew four trays from the chest, displaying as many layers of plastoid tiles, their face markings worked in ivory and black, their jet-black backs intricately carved in a uniform design.

"A traditional set," murmured the Martian. "I give you my word they are unmarked."

"Accepted," said Edmond. "Two games to shake down the play, the third for our stakes, if that's agreeable."

Gamirand nodded courteously and shuffled the tiles, face down. He then arranged the fifty-six in rows of seven and folded his hands to show the game might begin.

Edmond drew a trey in an honor suite; Gamirand imperturbably drew one in turn. Each placed his piece on edge before him, its back to his opponent. The second draw gave Edmond a numerical tile, which squared the value of the first. He was not so fortunate in his third, which was of a negative value and would have halved the value of his hand, but he was later able to discard it.

The game went on in silence except for low-voiced announcements of discards and challenges. When the scores were totaled it was Gamirand who had the higher.

"The fortunes of chance," he smiled. "At least I give you fair warning that I mean to win."

"Better luck next time," responded Edmond. "I'm not going to hand your strategic staff the information it wants without a fight. Loser shuffles, I believe?"

The Martian nodded, then, looking across the cell, half rose from his chair. An instant later a hand grasped Edmond's collar and hauled him roughly to his feet. Stirn faced him with burning eyes.

"What is this? What filthy scheme is this?" he demanded.

"You were asleep," retorted Edmond sullenly. "Why the hell didn't you stay asleep?"

"Because you said Gamirand hadn't been here—but he came back with that." The lieutenant jerked his head toward the *Chianto* chest. "I lay awake, listening. It took me till now to piece together enough of the dirty business. You're not gambling away military secrets, Edmond."

A dark flush suffused Stirn's honest face. "Unless you stop this now I'm going to forget you're top officer."

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up for scoring. The Martian spread his hands.

"But you have won—magnificently."

"Thanks," said Edmond dryly. "And now will you call off your sensitives? I've felt the hot breath of at least three of them on my neck for the last ten minutes."

"Four," Gamirand admitted with a wry smile. "Our best telepaths. Unfortunately your guard was impregnable. They could no more tell me what tiles you held than where your fleet is to meet. But you cannot blame me for trying."

"I don't," said Edmond. "And now, one thing more. Part of our wager was Lieutenant Stirn's freedom. It may be he'll refuse it. Will you see that he comes with me anyway?"

The Martian bowed. "With us a gambling debt is truly a debt of honor. We shall make every effort to persuade the lieutenant to go with you. Should we fail, he will come unknowingly."

THE thunder of the spatial drive was drumming through the little ship when Stirn groaningly lifted himself to face Edmond.

"Don't ask," said the latter at once. "I'll just start answering. One, we're aboard the *Medo's* life launch, free as air. Two, Gamirand doesn't know where the fleet is. Three, you were souped when they carried you in, thanks to some heroics about not winning your freedom by treason—I'm sorry, there was nothing else to be done. Four, we're headed for Pallas."

"Pallas!" roared Stirn. "Why the hell Pallas, when you know the fleet—"

Edmond clapped a hand over his mouth.

"The reason," said Edmond, "lies forward."

He led the way through the tiny passageways of the ship while Stirn followed on unsteady legs—past the food lockers, the drive cubby, the rear emergency port, until they came to a niche in which was racked a bank of seven oxygen tanks.

Edmond spun the valve of the fifth tank. No hiss of gas ensued.

"This nifty bit of camouflage," he explained, "covers an oscillator. You didn't think that old fox Gamirand would overlook a bet, did you? It took me three hours to find this; when I did, I was glad I'd set course for Pallas to begin with. You can bet your buttons that Martian Strategic has a tracer on us. So to Pallas we will go,

and I hope the Martian grand fleet follows. Our boys will mop up."

"Okay," grunted Stirn. "I owe you half an apology, maybe. But it was a moon-brained stunt. What if you'd lost?"

"I had to take a chance, I admit. For a minute I thought you'd gone back to sleep."

"I'd gone *what*?"

"Oh, it worked out fine, although I hate to think what would have happened if you hadn't managed to belt me a couple before Gamirand got the guards in to cop you. Poor Gamirand! He tried so hard to keep the game straight—on my side at least."

"If you don't unscramble," threatened Stirn, "I'm going to belt you again."

"Okay. You gave me the first clue yourself when you said the iron turned from black to white-hot. The psychos made you see that, of course, by hypnotic suggestion only. Then Gamirand made a crack about our inferior blood, and I remembered something one of our chaps once guessed about the Martians—something they've never let us check. But I checked, by handing Gamirand my service medal. When it clicked, I offered to gamble with him."

"Keep talking," warned Stirn.

"The psychos didn't show the iron red-hot. Gamirand told me my medal had a black-and-white ribbon. And the blood of Martian cattle is black. Ergo, all Martians are completely color-blind to red. Of course their scientists know it, but the average chap, like Gamirand, won't remember it. Out of sight, out of mind. They've never seen red; why should they remember it? Even their egotism helps them forget there's anything they can't see that we can. And remember they learn our language under hypnosis. So their minds simply reject the word 'red' as meaningless, and forget it."

"I hope," said Stirn grimly, "that all this has a point."

"Rather—that's why I had to let you sock me. My nose never was able to take it, and right then I needed gore—which looked plain black to Gamirand, and didn't show against the backs of the tiles. I marked the high ones with blood when I turned them over. There wasn't a chance of my losing. Even if I did win by a nose."

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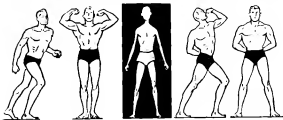
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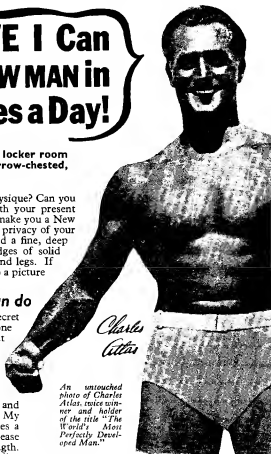
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